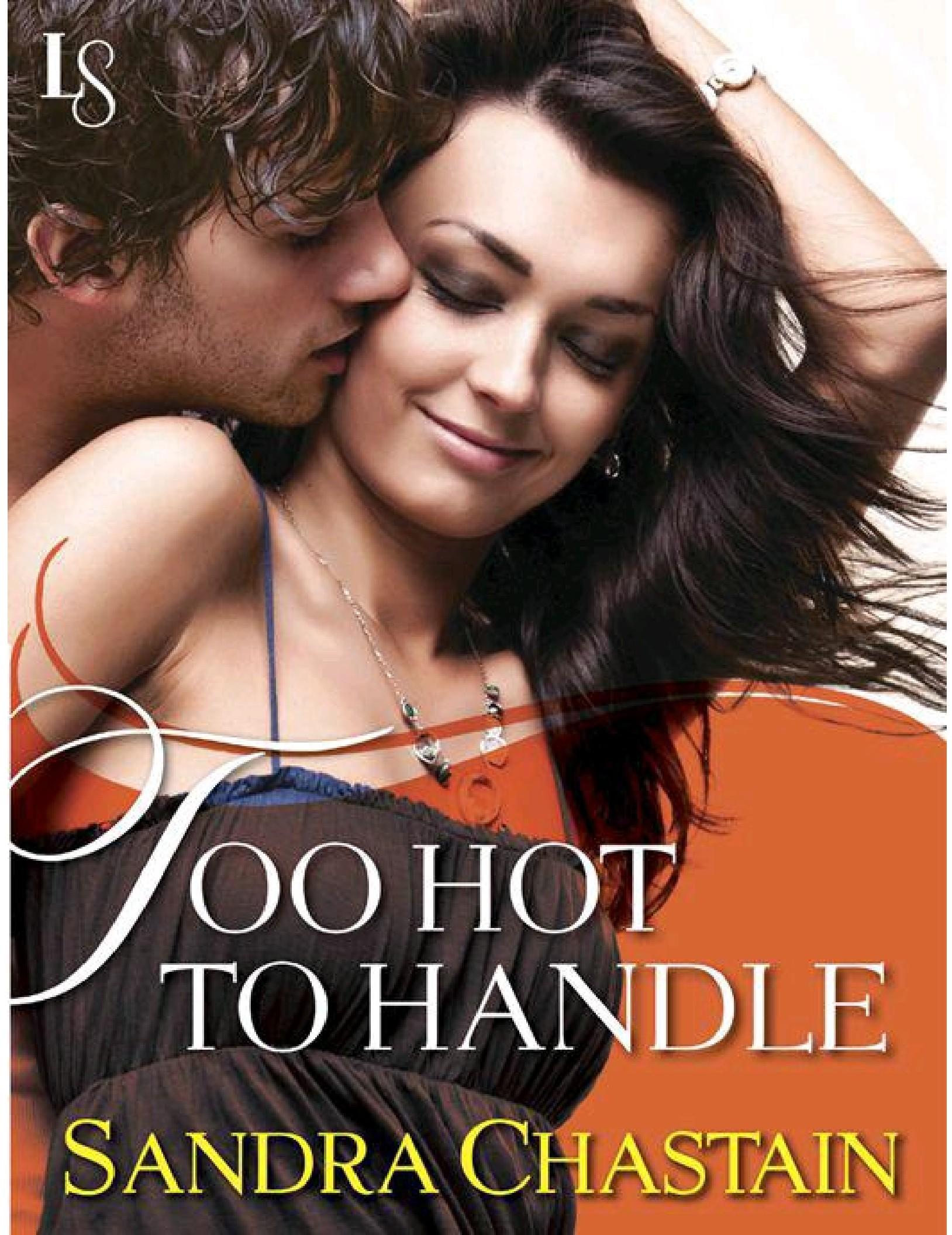


IS



TOO HOT TO HANDLE

SANDRA CHASTAIN

Too Hot to Handle

Sandra Chastain



Loveswept®

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Published in the United States of America by Loveswept, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC, a Penguin Random House Company, New York.

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eBook ISBN 978-0-345-54189-5

Originally published in the United States by Loveswept, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House Company, New York, in 1988.

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v3.1

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One

"You put one foot on that porch and I'll break your hairy leg."

To emphasize her stern words Callie Carmichael drummed a warning with her bare heels on the cabin wall. Her feet were high over her head. Her head was pillowied on a colorful folded quilt. She took a long, soothing breath of mountain air and reminded herself that all the fresh blood rushing down to her head was supposed to make her calmer. It wasn't working.

She stared past the ragged edges of the denim at her slender thighs, then over her legs to her dusty toes, where she focused with determination. Relax, she ordered herself. Be calm. You are a child of nature, caught in the eternal flow of the universe.

Again footsteps sounded on the porch. Callie sighed. So much for the flow of the universe.

"All right, you asked for it. I'm going to twist your ugly face into a map of the Smoky Mountains," she said loudly.

The steps halted, then retreated off the porch. Callie couldn't suppress a slight victory smile. Her empty threats usually didn't work this well.

"And if I catch you in the garden again, I'll make you eat collard greens the rest of your life," she continued. "No more ice cream for you, buddy. Ever."

"No more ice cream?" a throaty made voice asked in dignified tones. "How will I survive?"

Callie was so startled that she forgot the grace she'd learned in years of childhood ballet lessons. Her feet tumbled over her head, and she quickly rolled upright on the linoleum floor, bumping the woodpile with her shoulder. She caught a glimpse of her visitor through the screen.

"Oh, dear! You'd better come inside. Quick!" she called.

The visitor paused, uncertain, it seemed, about her change of heart. "You have to promise not to twist my face," he began drolly. Callie heard the distinct thuds of small, galloping hooves coming around the corner of the cabin.

"Hurry!" she repeated.

Unaware of impending doom, the visitor climbed the steps in a leisurely fashion and bent over to shove aside a woven basket filled with wildflowers. "I'm Matthew Holland, from Atlanta," he said pleasantly. "I'm here because the man down at the garage told me—"

"Too late!"

At the same moment that he straightened up, peering at her with a frown through the screen door, Callie heard hooves hit the porch's warped boards. In the next moment a small goat with curving white horns plowed into the visitor's long legs.

Those legs flew out from under him in classic athletic style, as if he were a quarterback who'd just been tackled by the meanest player in the NFL. He let out an

“oooph” of surprise and landed on his behind with an amazing amount of decorum, Callie thought. Dimly, as his feet made an arch into the air, she noted that he wore expensive-looking loafers. Callie shook the unrelated thought away and jumped up.

“William, damn your ornery hide!” she yelled. Callie raced out the door, which banged shut behind her, and leaped over the downed man without breaking stride. William paused by a rocking chair at the other side of the porch, looking at her from under bushy white brows as he planned another charge. “Get!” Callie ordered. “You know better than to do that!”

William, who knew better but rarely gave evidence of it, started baaing and jumped off the porch, with Callie close behind him. Callie ignored the pebbles stinging her feet and the privet hedge clawing at her skin as she chased the bellowing goat down a path to his chicken-wire pen by the barn. When he was safely locked inside the fence she shook a finger at him, then ran back to the porch to check on his latest victim.

The victim had gotten up, and was brushing casually at the seat of his tailored slacks. Once he straightened to his full height, she noticed, the porch’s low ceiling cleared his head by only a few inches. That meant he was well over six feet tall.

Callie stopped several yards away from him and wondered why she was leery of getting any closer. It wasn’t just that he was a stranger; it was something else—some impression of his power, his aura of control. He disturbed her.

“Are you all right?” Callie asked. He nodded, his face red.

“I love being run over by large animals that smell bad.” He paused. “You are Callie Carmichael, aren’t you? I am at the right cabin?” She nodded. His handsome face relaxed into an expression of exaggerated relief. “Thank heaven. I don’t want to have to go through this again. If all mountain people have guard goats, I’ll never set foot on another cabin porch as long as I live.”

“Your name is Matthew what? I didn’t catch it before.”

“Holland,” he supplied. His mouth crooked up in a polite smile. “The infamous goat exterminator. I’ll do your goat for free.” He cleared his throat. “Oh, all right. I’ll overlook his rudeness, this time.” He ran a hand through expertly styled blond hair. “I know I’m probably not the first, but after hearing the details, I couldn’t wait to get to your place. I hope I’m not too late.”

Callie looked at him in surprise for a moment. Then her puzzlement faded as she understood what he meant. She put her hands on her hips and stared shrewdly at him. After having a parade of single men knocking on her door for over six months, she could recognize her surrogate grandfather’s newest selection for her.

John Henry Webster was a seventy-two-year-old cupid, a grizzled mountain man who had been her real grandfather’s best friend. She loved him dearly, but he could be as stubborn as the goat she’d just chased. Worse, he was manipulative as the devil. Here stood evidence of that: a new man, sent here to court her. It was outrageous and embarrassing.

“Anything broken?” she inquired coolly. She didn’t want to be sued because of her pet’s eccentricities, so she’d at least be polite to this suitor.

“No, but I’ll never tap dance again,” he quipped. Callie felt a twinge of surprise at his

good humor in light of the circumstances. She felt other twinges, too, strange, uncomfortable little needles of sensation that she couldn't quite analyze.

John Henry's other victims never created these feelings. She frowned as she realized why.

Matthew Holland was big, blond, and absolutely breathtaking, with the most expressive brown eyes she'd ever encountered. Those eyes were now examining her minutely. He smoothed his hands down the front of a white linen jacket, and the action seemed incredibly sensual to Callie. *Oh, Lordy, John Henry Webster*, she mouthed silently, how could you do this to me?

Callie glanced into the sloping front yard that led to her gravel driveway. A white Corvette sat regally under the huge oak trees. Silhouetted against the smoky blue mountains in the distance, it seemed weirdly out of place. People drove Jeeps and trucks here in north Georgia, not Corvettes. Matt Holland was definitely an outsider. The dear Lord only knew what he had been doing in these mountains when John Henry had latched onto him.

She glanced down at the faded cut-off overalls covering her oldest tube top, and nearly groaned. What she wore had never been of much concern before, but today she wished she were wearing something a little less revealing. When she looked up, Matthew Holland was studying her so intently that she almost shivered.

"Well," Callie told him dryly, "I'm getting used to entertaining the local men up here, but having a stranger drop by is new. I apologize for looking so grubby."

His eyes widened. Callie could feel him taking her apart inch by inch, examining her and passing judgment. It rankled. Yuppie city slicker, she felt like saying in her own defense, what are you and your Gucci loafers doing in my lovely backcountry?

"I apologize for William's bad manners," she said.

"William?"

"The least John Henry could have done was warn you about William. Everybody in Sweet Valley knows to watch out for William."

"Who—no, *what* is William?"

"William is that long-horned angora goat that ruffled your dignity."

"If he's such a menace, why isn't he in a pen?"

"A pen?" She shook her head. "I couldn't do that. William just lets me share the place with him. He belonged to Gramps. He was here first."

"At the rate he's going, he's going to be here last, too."

"Oh, no. He knows how far to go. I'd already run him off the porch once this morning. He knows he's not allowed up here, but he can't resist the wildflowers." She pointed to an overflowing basket. "He thinks if he's very quiet, he can sneak up here and I won't hear him. When you came up the steps I thought you were William."

"Women rarely mistake me for a goat."

And I bet you have plenty of them, Callie thought disparagingly. Women, that was, not goats. She gave him a taut smile. "You and William do smell different from each other," Callie admitted. Suddenly she realized that she was leaning toward Matthew Holland, inhaling the light, crisp scent of a cologne she recognized.

Once, centuries ago, she'd been an expert on expensive colognes and designer clothes and upscale life-styles, so now she had no trouble identifying all three of those things in regard to him. The cologne was very alluring. She stepped back from him.

"So how old are you, Mr. Holland? Thirty-fourish, I'd guess." Callie tilted her head to one side, ran her fingers through the mass of fuzzy brunette curls that caressed her bare shoulders, and kept her sky-blue eyes fastened on him with what she hoped was disconcerting intensity.

After a long pause during which he simply stared at her as if she'd started speaking in tongues, he shrugged. "Thirty-five."

"That's just perfect," she said solemnly. Callie thought to herself, Well, John Henry, at least this one's full grown. Last month he'd sent a college-age boy up here.

"Oh, I see," Holland said suddenly. He nodded, and looked reassured. "You're sentimental about it. I understand that. Everything has to be just right. You want to save it for someone mature enough to appreciate such a rare find. Someone like me, who knows how to treasure it."

Callie fumbled for a minute. Good heavens, what had John Henry wrought?

"Y-yes." She coughed to hide her surprise at his forthright words. "If that were what I had in mind, I'd have to admit that you'd ... do."

All right, Callie thought angrily. Enough was enough. This had to stop. She wondered if she could unnerve John Henry so badly that he would never send her another prospective suitor. She didn't need matchmaking, she didn't need a man, and she certainly didn't need the kind of man who wore real linen and fine cologne and talked with blunt coolness about sexual liaisons. Callie mulled over a plan for a few seconds. Then she smiled.

"I'm twenty-eight," she told him sweetly, and winked. "I hope that's all right."

He nodded, looking even more puzzled, and seemed to search for an appropriate answer. "That's ... nice."

"I suppose you were told that I'd be receptive to your visit," she added. "You've certainly caught my interest. Now, tell me exactly what you had in mind, Mr. Holland."

"Ms. Carmichael," he said sternly. "I'd like to be honest with you. Let's dispense with all this silliness. You know why I'm here, you know what you have, so I'll make you a direct, straightforward deal."

She gulped. "You will?" He'd thrown her a real curve. She'd been debating whether to tell him that John Henry was an old busybody, and not to be taken seriously.

"Yes, I hope you'll agree when you've heard what I propose. I'm willing to pay well, more than what you've been offered in the past, I'm sure."

Shock washed across her face. "Pay?" she asked, surprised. Suddenly she realized that something was wrong. Callie's shock turned to anger. John Henry hadn't judged this man's character very well. This time he'd sent a real con man. "Well, Matt, I may or may not agree to your deal, but being paid is a new approach. Sit down and tell me what you think is a fair price."

Callie swept past him, dropped into one of the rockers, hung her knee over the rocker arm, and, with a quizzical expression on her face, waited for him to go on. She could see

a bead of perspiration roll down his tanned cheek and she wondered if he was warm, or if maybe he wasn't as experienced as he wanted her to think.

"I'm sure you know the value," he went on crisply. "This can't have been your first offer, so I'm prepared to go to twenty-five hundred dollars straight up, no matter the body condition."

What had this man said? Twenty-five hundred dollars? No matter the condition of the body? She crossed her arms over her chest and smiled coldly.

"You can save yourself the trouble of upping your price. I've never been one to haggle." She leaned against the porch rail and enjoyed the amazed look he gave her. "Matt, either a thing is worth a price or it isn't. I always make up my mind instantly, and if I'm wrong, then *c'est la vie!* The past is past, and tomorrow is always another day. Don't you agree?"

He cleared his throat and began to look angry. "Well, I—" He choked. "I can't say that I've ever had a discussion quite like this before. Are you sure you're Callie Carmichael?"

"Of course I'm Callie Carmichael. Why would you doubt it?"

"You just aren't what I expected. Not," he added quickly, "that I ... I mean, I was expecting to deal with someone much older."

"If you thought you were going to deal with some desperate old maid, you were wrong," she said calmly.

"Please, just listen to my deal, Callie. I'll top any other offer you have, no matter how long you've let the essentials go uncared for."

This was getting a little kinky. "I care for the essentials regularly," she said in a distracted voice. The man wasn't only arrogant, he was crude.

"Great! But it doesn't matter. I've handled this kind of problem before. Enough time, money, and loving care and it will come alive. I'm an expert at bringing beauty back to life."

"Oh, you are, are you? Money and a little loving care? Well, for your information, there's nothing wrong with these essentials, even if they haven't been used for the past few years. This was a poor joke, and it isn't funny anymore. I'm not some backwoods hoyden who's willing to sell her favors to you, no matter what John Henry may have promised! Now, get out of here before I turn William loose again!"

Callie couldn't remember ever being so furious, not only with John Henry for sending this man up here, but with the man for his sublime arrogance. She shook both fists at him.

"I should tell you," he said in a voice taut with strain, "that I don't know any John Henry. I simply came here to make you a proposition. If this is the response you've given the other buyers, I'm not surprised you haven't sold."

"You ... you ... arrogant creep!" she retorted. "I'm not selling!" Callie put her hands on her hips. "I'm going to count to ten. If you're not in your car by then, you're going to be goat bait."

Frowning fiercely, his hand shaking, he pointed at her.

"Lady, you're a lunatic."

"And you've got more money than you've got soul! You're staining the good

atmosphere up here! Get back to Atlanta!"

"Let me tell you, Ms. Carmichael—"

"One. Two. Three ..."

"You are sadly mistaken if you think—"

"Four. Five. Six. William will love bashing you again."

"I didn't come here to solicit—"

"Seven. Eight. Nine."

"Ms. Carmichael, I only came here to buy your grandfather's car!"

"Ten." Callie paused. Then she swayed as if the mountain breeze had just turned into a hurricane, and pressed both hands to her throat. She felt the blood drain out of her face.

"Car? Oh, my," she whispered. "Oh, my."

Two

Callie sat down weakly on the edge of the porch.

"The car?"

"Yes. You did inherit a 1953 Oldsmobile Fiesta convertible, didn't you?"

Callie simply stared at him, his words thundering through her mind. She couldn't breathe. The air seemed to solidify in her lungs. She couldn't focus on anything except the angry expression on his face. "The car?" she repeated incredulously.

"Yes. I collect 1953 convertibles."

For a second she wondered if John Henry had cooked up yet another innovative excuse to send a man to her cabin. "That's a novel approach, Matt."

"I have all the others from 1953, except the Fiesta."

"Oh, of course. Everyone I know owns dozens of antique cars." John Henry had given this man a reason to seek her out that was sure to zero in on her weakness about the old convertible in the barn, but it wasn't going to work. "You can drop that line, Mr. Holland. I don't believe a word of it. Nobody could want that battered old car. I'm not being vain. I'm simply aware of John Henry's schemes. You came to check *me* out, not the car."

Matt inhaled wearily. This couldn't be happening to him. Things like this never happened to him. He organized his life so that nothing ever happened that he wasn't prepared for. He always considered all the possibilities and was ready accordingly. But this earthy little woman and her attack goat were two things he hadn't counted on.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Well?" he echoed, trying desperately to gather his thoughts.

"Well, explain yourself. Am I or am I not the object of your search?"

She was tapping her foot impatiently. What had she asked? What was he expected to do? He had no idea. He could only stare at her in bemusement.

"Well, yes. I was looking for you."

"And you've found me. What now?" Even though she was effectively covered, the man was still staring at her as though he'd never seen a woman's body before. It would serve John Henry right if she actually fell into Matt's arms. Yes, that was right, her only motive for romancing this blond stranger would be to prove a point to John Henry. Nothing more.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean," Matt said formally.

Heavens, he had such a confused, innocent look about him. If she hadn't known better, she'd have almost believed him. But she'd gone too far now to turn back. She put both hands on her hips and did her best Ellie May Clampett impression.

"Well, now, looks like the man John Henry picked is a little shy. I at least expected him to choose a red-blooded mountain man to court me, not some city fellow with ice water in his veins."

"Ice water?" That did it. He took one step, then reached out and hooked both hands under her arms. Callie found herself being pulled up with such force that she didn't have time to protest. "Listen, you goofy mountain witch, if I weren't a gentleman I'd be chasing you around the barn by now. And you'd have no one to blame but yourself, teasing me the way you are."

Callie huffed breathlessly. "I'm proving a point. You'd never do anything I didn't intend for you to do."

"Oh, yes?"

His arms slid around her, and his mouth settled tightly on hers. Every nerve in her body exploded, and a curious, sweet pain invaded her senses. His fingers danced over her bare arms, and he deepened the kiss. When he finally pulled away, Callie heard herself moan.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asked thickly.

"I—"

"I'm not sure who you think I am, Callie Carmichael," he said thickly, "but I'm no wimp and this is no game. In another minute I'm going to forget what I came here for and attempt to seduce you right on this front porch, and I'd bet money that you'd like it."

"When donkeys fly. Let go of me."

"You kissed me back just now."

"This is a crazy situation. I didn't mean to provoke—maybe I did mean to provoke you, but ..."

"I really don't know anybody named John Henry, but if I did, I'd owe him my eternal gratitude." He kissed the corner of her mouth and touched the rim of her lower lip with his tongue. "And I don't know what you thought, but all I did come for was to buy your car. I'm not sure what I'm doing now."

"You're being very forward." Her chest heaving, she pushed him away. They stared at each other as a strained silence stretched between them. "Car?" she repeated blankly. "Do you swear this is all about the car?"

"Mac McKinnon's blue Fiesta convertible. I heard about it at a car show in Hershey, Pennsylvania. I want to buy it. A guy at the garage in Sweet Valley told me how to find your cabin."

"It isn't blue," she murmured. "The car." Caught by his hypnotic brown eyes, she could barely remember what a car was, much less what the old Fiesta looked like. Callie closed her eyes for a moment. "It's red and white."

"That's okay." He paused, fighting for words. "I really am a collector," he assured her. "Callie, believe me, I don't know who John Henry is, or what you think I'm doing here, but before this gets entirely out of hand, let's talk."

She looked at him shrewdly. "Nothing is going to get out of hand, mister." She added to herself, *Unless you kiss me again. I make no promises.*

Callie went to one of the rockers and sat down. Matt Holland walked to one of the log posts that supported the porch roof. He turned his back to her, looped his arm around the post, and took several deep breaths.

Somewhere in the distance he could hear a cow bellowing mournfully, and a wasp buzzed around the roof above where he was standing. He was equally as conscious of the woman breathing deeply behind him. Finally he trusted himself to sit down beside her in one of the rockers.

"You really don't know John Henry, do you?" she asked. Callie was beginning to sense that she'd made a colossal error.

"No."

"Oh, good grief."

"Ditto, Callie."

Callie's face turned three shades of scarlet. She smiled sheepishly, then slumped back in the chair and covered her eyes with her arm.

Matt stared at her helplessly, not knowing what to say. All the while he could see her magnificent breasts swelling against the cotton tube top, and his thoughts scattered wildly. He was having trouble believing his own part in this fiasco. How could he ever convince the woman to take his offer seriously if they stayed immersed in this strange, sensual atmosphere?

Then he heard it, the choked, hiccupping noise. She was crying.

"Oh, please don't," he said urgently, gently. "I can understand your thinking what you did, under the circumstances. It's really very funny...." Matt's voice trailed off as he realized what was happening.

"I ... know," she managed to say. Callie was laughing hysterically. "This is priceless," she finally gasped out. Then, when she'd regained control, she said, "Let me try to explain."

"I wish you would."

"In addition to owning the local garage, John Henry Webster was my grandfather's friend. Since my grandfather died last year, he's appointed himself my protector. He decided that I need a man. For six months he's been parading every single man from seventeen to seventy by here. When I refused everybody in the valley, he threatened to send up the next eligible bachelor who stopped by the station for gas."

"And you thought ..."

"I thought he'd sent you, as a joke, because he knows I wouldn't go for a slick business type like you. You were perfect for his purposes. I thought he'd come up with the idea about you wanting to buy the car. And you played the part so beautifully. I was sure he'd sent you here and I was going to teach both of you a lesson."

"A joke, huh? Well, I don't know whether I'm sorry or glad that I'm not who you thought I was," Matt admitted, smiling to cover his dismay. So she didn't care for his type. "Getting even with John Henry is becoming very interesting."

"How could I have made such a fool of myself, practically offering my body to a man I don't even know? Good heavens." Callie squirmed uncomfortably, suddenly unable to face Matt as she vividly recalled how she had responded to his kiss. She sprang to her feet and walked across the porch to the rail at the other end and looked out at the mountains in the distance.

"Callie, does John Henry work at the garage?" She nodded. "He did direct me here,

then." Matt described the squinty-eyed old man who'd told him where to find Mac McKinnon's granddaughter. Matt shook his head. "I thought he was a bit too pleased when I asked for directions to your grandfather's house, but I swear that I had no idea what he was grinning about. I thought you were some snaggle-toothed mountain woman."

"Snaggle-toothed mountain woman?" she repeated incredulously. "Who told you a thing like that?"

"Nobody. I mean, all I knew was that your grandfather had a car that he wouldn't let anybody see. I stopped to ask how to get to his house, and the man at the garage said that it now belonged to his homely, old-maid granddaughter. I think your protector has a delicious sense of humor," Matt finished with a broad smile.

"Homely, old-maid granddaughter, eh? Well! John Henry's gone too far this time."

"He must be having himself a big laugh back at the garage," Matt agreed.

"He and everybody else who's come by. The way he jabbers, this will be all over the valley by tomorrow. Say, I don't suppose you'd care to help me get even, would you?" Her eyes lit up, and she clapped her hands enthusiastically.

"How's that?" He simply couldn't keep his eyes off her. That mass of dark hair tangling wildly across her face and those long, sun-kissed legs were totally distracting, not to mention the way her breasts never seemed to stay still behind the bib of her overalls. More than that, though, he liked her spirit. He lived a very quiet, regimented life, and she had brought a temporary wildness to it that he found intriguing.

"Matt, I'm sure John Henry didn't really expect you to turn out to be a hot-blooded mountain man in disguise. By this time he thought I would have chewed you up and spit you out. He probably thinks you're halfway to Atlanta by now. Right?"

He nodded helplessly, wondering if maybe he shouldn't be on his way.

"Let's get even with him a little, Matt."

"Fine. How?"

She turned around and sat down on the porch rail, swinging one leg as she began to think.

"Tell me exactly what you told John Henry, Matt."

"I told him that I had come to make a legitimate offer for the convertible, provided it was the one I've been looking for. He explained that Mr. McKinnon had passed away and left his estate to his homely, old-maid granddaughter." Matt added seriously, "I'm very sorry to hear about your grandfather's death, Callie, but my offer for the car still stands."

Callie looked at him regretfully. "Oh, I'm not going to sell Ruby. I'm sorry to have put you through all this and then have to turn you down. If you want to leave right now, I'll understand. But"—she paused and smiled up at him—"I think it'll be a lot more fun if you stay."

"If you'll let me see the car, I might be able to raise my offer, Callie."

"It wouldn't matter. I don't care about money. Ruby's not for sale at any price."

"Could I at least have a look at ... Rudy?"

"It's Ruby, not Rudy. Sure. If you'll stick around for lunch and help me get even with

John Henry, I'll let you see the car, though I can't imagine what you'd get out of just looking at it."

"Ruby, as you call her, isn't just any car, not if my information is correct. And I'll do whatever you want about John Henry, if you'll consider my offer."

"Maybe." Callie's grin suddenly reminded Matt of the coy expression John Henry had had on his face when he'd given the directions to Callie's house. This wasn't going to be easy, but Matt knew he'd get the car. He was an astute businessman, and he always got what he went after. Could it be, he wondered, that perhaps he wanted this brunette stranger more than he wanted the car?

"Let's go, city slicker," she ordered. She climbed off the porch rail and headed down the steps. "Watch out for William. I don't think he can get out now, but I've been wrong before. He isn't used to being confined."

Matt took a worried look around the yard and hurried after her. He sighed in relief when they reached the barn and he saw the goat's beady eyes peering at him through the fence of a large pen beside it.

"Eat dirt and die," he whispered to William under his breath. William snorted.

Callie pulled a wide plank door back and led the way into the dusty old barn. She stood back and made a grand gesture.

"Matt, meet Ruby."

Matt whistled in delight. Here it was, in all its glory, one of the few 1953 Fiesta convertibles in the United States. Here it was, parked in a dirty horse stall with a fat red chicken sitting on the back seat.

"Get that ... that animal off of it!" he said fiercely.

"Shoo! Get off that car, Esmeralda. You're supposed to be in your box laying eggs for lunch. Shoo!" Callie fanned her arms at the chicken, who let out a disgruntled squawk and half-flew, half-ran out of the shadowy barn.

"Does everything here have a name?" Matt asked sternly. He peered at the car closely to determine just what Esmeralda might have left there. This was a sacrilege, letting the barnyard fowl squat on his car. His car, yes. Satisfied that the Fiesta's old upholstery was original, he relaxed.

"Yes," Callie told him coolly, "everything has a name, including the vegetables in my garden. They like it when I talk to them personally. You ought to see my strawberries. They practically swell up and pop, trying to outgrow one another."

Matt could understand that kind of reaction to Callie Carmichael. He'd experienced a similar kind of response when he'd kissed her. But now it was the car that captured his attention. He ran his fingertips along the fender, under the side windows, and across Ruby's chrome grille. He squatted down and looked under the wheel well, opened the front door and closed it again, nodding in pleasure at the deep echo its closing made.

"You hear that? Solid as a drum. They don't make them like this anymore. Real leather seats. She's a jewel, all right. How does she run?"

"When John Henry's tuned her up and put in a new battery she goes like the wind. Otherwise, she's a little sluggish."

"John Henry has seen the car? That old faker. I asked him if he'd seen it and he

played like he didn't know what I was talking about. Said I'd have to talk to you. I may have to have a word with him."

"Well, that won't be difficult. He's coming here for lunch. And speaking of lunch, I'd better get it started. Come along. You're going to help."

Reluctantly, Matt gave the automobile a final caress and turned to follow Callie back toward the house. William stretched his head over the fence and baaed, and Matt smiled victoriously at him.

Callie's eyes were turned toward the sleek Corvette that sat under her oak trees. "Matt, that's a classic, isn't it?"

"Yes. I don't suppose William can get out, can he? He looks like the kind of goat who'd chew on classic Corvettes."

"Your car's safe as long as William's in prison. He doesn't like anything new and different in his territory. He thinks he's protecting me."

"At least we have something in common." Matt followed Callie up the back steps and onto a tiny screened-in porch outside the kitchen door.

"Good heavens," Callie protested, "I don't need a protector."

"Out here in the wilds..."

"It's safer here than in the city, Matt."

"And what, pray tell, do you do for a living?"

"As little as possible." They stepped into a cozy little kitchen with ancient appliances.

"Wow," Matt said. "The last time I saw a refrigerator that old, it was in the Smithsonian."

Callie twisted around and smiled at him. "You disapprove of my lazy lifestyle."

"Not disapprove," he said swiftly. "I don't understand it. You're obviously intelligent, and from the way you talk, well educated, I suspect."

"And I'm perfectly content. I make baskets to sell to the tourists in Sweet Valley. I garden. I may not be rich, but I get by. I don't need money and I don't want money." She reached up and took a basket from the top of the refrigerator, then handed it to Matt for his inspection. "Oh, and I spend a great deal of time campaigning for various causes. I write a lot of letters and help organize rallies, mostly for nature projects and endangered historical sites."

"Causes?" he repeated, and smiled. "Like 'Save the Pink-Tipped, One-Eyed Gullywhumper'?"

Her offended gaze shot him down. "I didn't think you'd understand or care," she noted calmly. "I'm a conservationist and a preservationist."

Matt gazed at her with admiration. "I apologize," he said sincerely. "I appreciate your attitude, because I don't like change either. In anything. I much prefer old things. People used to have pride in their work, and built things to last."

Callie studied him in surprise. It amazed her to think that she and this businessman had something so elemental in common. "Maybe you're okay, for a city slicker," she offered.

"Ah. What a compliment."

Smiling, Callie pushed open the screen door and motioned for Matt to follow her back

into the yard. He carried the basket, studying it with interest. "This is very well made. I like it," he said.

"I make my baskets out of wild grapevines and kudzu. The grapevines last. You just try to destroy that vine basket you're holding. But the kudzu baskets don't. Want to guess which ones I sell the most of? Kudzu."

"Where are we going?"

"To the garden."

"To get kudzu?"

"Not unless that's what you want for lunch. I thought I'd cook something a little more ordinary."

"Nothing's ordinary around here," he remarked pleasantly. Matt fingered the thick basket. "You take pride in your work. I can tell. This is an art, not a manufacturing process. It's really ... very interesting."

"Thank you." Callie was absurdly pleased by his simple evaluation of her work. "Most people don't appreciate good craftsmanship."

"I do. Take that refrigerator. It's like my paint. I'll bet it's at least twenty-five years old, and it's still running. One you bought today wouldn't last longer than ten years. Planned obsolescence."

"You make paint?"

"My company makes paint," he said.

So that was where the fine linen and the expensive-looking loafers and the Corvette came from, she thought wryly. Plain old paint. "What kind of paint?" she asked.

"Heavy-duty paint. For exterior use. I came up with the formula myself."

"And what's so special about your paint that could compare with my refrigerator and baskets?"

He chuckled. "It lasts twenty-five years under most conditions. I wouldn't be involved in anything that couldn't withstand the test of time. That's why I collect old cars. They only get better."

"And I'll bet you still have all your toy soldiers wrapped in tissue paper and put away in a box. Your teddy bear probably still has both his eyes, too."

Matt smiled at the accuracy of her thinking. His toys were still neatly preserved in his attic and his teddy bear definitely still had its eyes. He nodded.

"Not me," Callie said fervently. "I loved my teddy so hard that there isn't anything left except the memory." She came to a neat little garden that was surrounded by a fence, and opened the gate. "And I never knew a paint color that kept me interested for more than a year. A paint that lasts twenty-five years? Not for me. It'd be useless. I'd get bored and repaint just for the heck of it." She motioned for Matt to come inside, latched the gate, and knelt in the loamy soil by a plot of short, bushy plants.

Matt exhaled slowly at the unexpected sensations that warmed him as he watched sunlight play off her dark hair. Her hands were tanned and callused. She was an earth mother who seemed at ease with her knees burrowed in the fragrant soil and her bare arms browning in the morning sun. The overalls pulled tightly across her hips and made her figure even more enticing.

"Callie?" His voice came out a little strained. "What are you looking for in those weeds?"

"These aren't weeds; they're strawberry plants. I'm picking strawberries for lunch. They don't last very long, so I pick them as close to the time I serve them as possible. See?"

She held up a handful of plump red berries, and he awkwardly stuck the basket forward to catch them. She kept one, then put it in her mouth and sucked on it, drawing the pulp slowly inside. A drop of red juice trickled down her chin, and she caught it with her tongue, bringing the sweet liquid back inside her mouth. She appeared to be totally unaware of the effect she was having on him. He stared.

"Are you all right?" she asked suddenly. "You look a little odd."

"Picking strawberries is hard work."

She laughed and turned back to gather more. "Haven't you ever picked them before?"

"Sure, right out of the ice in the fresh-vegetable section of the supermarket."

Heedless of his white slacks, Matt got down on his knees beside her and began fishing gingerly for the soft berries. He wondered briefly what Phil Myers, his partner at Holland Paint, would do if he could see him now. Phil would have him committed, that was what he'd do.

"Here, try one, Mr. Paint King." She held a berry up to his mouth and waited calmly for his lips to part.

Matt's mouth fell open, and Callie slid the berry inside. "Simple pleasures, Matthew. They come to us, we enjoy them, and they're gone."

Like this minute with you, he thought wistfully.

His lips were a hot, damp pressure on her fingertips, and she nearly jerked her hand away. They looked at each other for a long moment, as if they were poised on the edge of some unknown abyss.

Finally she managed to speak. "Pick a couple of cups of the deep-red ones." She stood up, stared at his upturned face for a moment, then walked quickly toward the gate.

"Where are you going, mountain woman?"

"To fix lunch. John Henry will be here in a few minutes, and I want to be sure everything is ready. Close the gate behind you. The only thing William likes better than wildflowers is this garden."

Matt watched the lithe movements of her slender body as she walked back toward the house. He felt perspiration roll down his face and spot his custom-made shirt. He put the basket down and removed the shirt and his undershirt, then tossed them in a heap behind him. If he was going to turn farmer, he was going to have to get some overalls of his own.

"Old MacHolland had a farm," he sang softly. "And on that farm he had an antique car." But as he picked the berries it wasn't the Fiesta that made him hurry, it was the woman who believed in simple pleasures.

"Well ... I see you found her."

Matt looked up from his strawberry picking. Leaning over the fence was the tall, thin

man from the garage. He was grinning broadly, shuffling a wooden matchstick from one side of his mouth to the other. He shooed a spring butterfly away from his khaki coveralls.

"Yes, indeed, I found her. Thanks," Matt answered calmly. He knew John Henry was waiting for some reaction, some indication of what his little game had accomplished, but Matt just smiled at him as he went through the gate and started toward the house.

He heard John Henry trailing behind him, muttering under his breath. "Well, old man ... he hasn't run off, so she didn't take him apart. Maybe you misjudged her. What do you think now?"

Matt turned around and started to answer.

"I think, old man," John Henry answered himself without giving Matt a chance to speak, "I think you don't believe what you're seeing. She's got this idiot picking berries in his fancy pants and pointy-toed shoes."

Matt grinned, faced forward, and kept walking.

John Henry began again, raising his voice as he ambled along behind. "What'd Callie say to you, boy?"

"Wasn't much need to talk," Matt told him pleasantly. "You know how it is between a man and a woman sometimes. She's really special. Afterward she invited me to stay for lunch." They'd reached the back door. Matt opened the screen and stepped inside, blinking to adjust to the difference in the light.

"After what?" John Henry's barked question was smothered by the sound of the door slamming behind him.

Callie was standing at the table, setting it with red earthenware plates. She took the basket from Matt and placed it in the sink. She'd changed from her overalls to a brightly colored peasant skirt and a loose white top, which only played more havoc with Matt's imagination as it emphasized the shape of her body.

Matt shook his head. This woman was going to drive him crazy. This woman was—she walked toward him, looped her arms around his neck, and drew his head down to hers—going to kiss him. Her mouth still tasted of strawberries, and his bare chest felt the imprint of her breasts as though there were no blouse between them. He kissed her in return.

"Ah-ah-ahem!" John Henry sputtered as he came inside. "I swaney, Callie. What about lunch?"

Matt dropped his hands and stepped back. He didn't know what was happening. This wasn't like him. Standing in the kitchen kissing a strange woman, with her self-appointed protector looking on. He didn't know what to say. Callie did.

"Oh, John Henry. I didn't see you there. Sit down. Lunch will be ready in a minute." She turned to the sink and began washing the berries. "Matthew, darling, if you want to wash up, there's a spigot down by the outhouse. I've laid out a towel and soap on the old milk churn."

"How about a bathroom?" Matt asked, realizing that he'd never needed to be by himself to think quite so badly before in his life.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Callie said reluctantly. "We're rather rustic here. You'll find the

little ... bathhouse around the other side of the cabin, at the end of the path. It's one of those old things that last forever—like you were talking about. Look for the apple tree in bloom and make a right. The house has a sickle moon painted on the door. You can't miss it." She wasn't about to tell him she had indoor plumbing—a perfectly fine bathroom just off her bedroom.

Matt heard John Henry's snicker as he went back outside.

A few minutes later—cleaned up, his wilted shirt and undershirt back in place—Matt started up the path toward the house. He whistled, feeling like a latter-day Huckleberry Finn. Atlanta was going to be dull, after today.

"Look out for yourself, Mr. Holland!" John Henry called from the door.

Matt heard the thud of hooves behind him and didn't bother to check out the source by turning around. William was out again, and he apparently didn't like whistling. Matt sprinted for the back porch, cursing the Saks Fifth Avenue salesman who'd sold him Italian loafers. They just weren't made for running. John Henry flung the back door open, and he charged inside.

"What do you have to do to make friends with that damned thing?" Matt asked breathlessly.

"Don't know," John Henry answered offhandedly. "Nobody besides Callie ever has."

Callie looked up from the stove. "William likes Lacey Lee. Are you all right, Matt?"

"Sure. I just set a new land-speed record, that's all."

"Exercise is good for you. Did you find the apple tree?" Callie carried a pitcher of rich red tea to the table.

"Your directions were perfect. Where should I sit?"

"By me, darling, of course." Callie sat down and pulled an adjacent chair closer to her own.

Matt smiled smugly at John Henry's gaping expression. "Who's Lacey, a female goat?" Matt asked.

"Lacey's an old friend of mine." Callie patted the chair seat. "Sit your sweet self down before the alfalfa sprouts wilt. John Henry, you too."

"Before the what begins to wilt?" Matt asked. He sat down, glancing at his food for the first time. In the center of the plate was a tough-looking pocket of hard bread, filled with green vegetable sprouts. That was the only thing on his plate.

"Looks good," he lied. Matt glanced up at John Henry and saw him staring at the unappetizing food with a look of sheer disbelief. "What is it, Callie?" Matt inquired.

"It's a sandwich." Callie picked up the concoction and took a bite.

"Where's the bread?" John Henry lifted his hand and began to examine it.

"This is the bread. It's pita bread. It's made like a pocket, to hold the filling. I make my own mayonnaise, thanks to Esmeralda's eggs, and grow my own sprouts."

"You've done it now, J.H. You've gone too far with this manhunt thing," John Henry said rhetorically. "She's getting revenge." He squinted at Callie. "Every farmer in the valley grows sprouts like these, Callie. But as far as I know, they only feed 'em to the cattle. What's this brown stuff?"

"That's wheat germ. It gives food a nutty taste."

"Well, well," John Henry said drolly. "I thought for a minute it was dirt. You can't eat this goat food, John Henry," he muttered under his breath. "She's doing this for revenge."

Even though she'd heard every word, Callie asked, "What was that you said, John Henry?"

"Nothing. I was just talking to myself."

They sat in silence for a minute, chewing laboriously. Matt looked around the cabin. There was a cozy living room, with one cushioned rocking chair and a very large overstuffed couch in front of an enormous rock fireplace. Plump, colorful pillows spilled from the couch onto a braided rug. Through a door he could see a giant spool bed with a bright red-and-yellow quilt.

"Somebody around here thinks big," he commented, noting that everything was just the right size for a man. For him, perhaps. It was a delightful, enchanted place. Enchanted, yes. Nothing else would explain why a suave and socially prominent multimillionaire was wearing a filthy shirt and eating wheat germ and alfalfa sprouts in a log cabin at the base of a north Georgia mountain. Callie Carmichael had cast a spell over him.

Her voice interrupted his whimsical thoughts. "I get the feeling that you don't like your food," she told John Henry. "What about you, Matt?"

"Well, I can't say it's something I have every day for lunch," he admitted as he closed his eyes and took another bite.

"No? And what do you usually have for lunch?"

Matthew choked, swallowed the half-chewed green sprouts, and washed them down with a large sip of iced tea. At least the tea tasted like iced tea was supposed to taste. "I usually have a light soup and a spinach salad," he answered, wondering how he was ever going to eat the rest of the sandwich. "Some times I skip lunch and work out in my private gym."

She smiled benignly. "This is healthy, even if it is boring. Now, if you're still around for supper, I have a nice yogurt custard planned. Yogurt and bran mixed with fertile eggs and a few other goodies. I just love experimenting with new dishes."

John Henry stood up abruptly. "I just remembered, Joe Reed is bringing his car by for a brake job at one o'clock. I'd better skip lunch, or whatever this is, today. You understand, don't you Callie?"

"I'm afraid not, John Henry. I made this lunch as a thank you for the awful trick you pulled on Matt and me. I thought you deserved something special." Callie stood up. Through barely open lips, with the precise diction of a marine drill sergeant, she ordered, "Eat it."

John Henry looked at Matt helplessly, and Matt had to repress the urge to laugh out loud. John Henry sat back down and took a bite of his lunch. Satisfied that he'd gotten the picture, Callie hid a grin and went to the sink to wash and hull the strawberries. She knew the bowl of fresh whipped cream she had in the refrigerator would make up for the alfalfa sandwich John Henry was gamely swallowing.

After he grumbled to himself a couple of times and managed several more bites, she

relented and added, "Of course, John Henry, if you'd like me to wrap that in tin foil, you could take it along. But you'd miss out on the strawberries and whipped cream."

"Never mind the foil. I'll carry it like this." Shortly after the scrape of his chair legs had died away, John Henry was halfway down the walk. With Matt peering over her shoulder, Callie peeked out a window and watched the old man give the rest of his sprout sandwich to William. Even William seemed a little tentative. Laughing, Callie collapsed into her chair, and Matt watched her with gleaming eyes.

"Do you really know how to make yogurt custard, Callie?"

"No, but I've been intending to give it a try. It surely must be better than the stuffed grape leaves that I tried the last time I was in a gourmet-health-food phase."

"What's wrong with plain old steak and potatoes?" Matt sat down and rested his chin on one hand.

"Oh, I never cook the same thing twice," Callie said seriously, "and I've already done both of those. You know, this bread is a little stale. Well, no matter, William will eat it."

"No wonder he's weird. It's his diet."

"No wonder you're so stuffy. It's your diet." She was having a hard time keeping up the light banter. His eyes were following every motion she made. Her heart rate had never completely returned to normal since his first touch, and now her heart began to pound erratically. Her mouth felt dry, and she knew it was caused by the intensity of his gaze. Suddenly the room seemed too small and much too intimate.

"Well, looks like you get John Henry's berries and cream." Callie scrambled to her feet and took the crock of fresh whipped cream from the refrigerator. She divided the berries into two bowls and ladled on a mountain of the fluffy white topping. "Let's go out on the porch, where it's cool, to eat this."

"Fine," he agreed, following her, though he had his doubts that the temperature between them would get any cooler.

Callie stepped out onto the porch and took a deep breath, drawing the sweet scents of late spring into her lungs. Matt had invaded her little house, and she didn't like the tight feeling he stirred up in her. Suddenly her little game had become serious.

She stood at the top of the porch steps, leaning against a post as she spooned berries and cream into her mouth. Matt stood in the doorway of the house, watching her. She didn't think he even tasted what he was swallowing. She wasn't certain that she was tasting much either. The silence stretched out, and Callie searched for something innocuous to say.

"What are you thinking?" she blurted out.

"About what?"

"Anything. Your departure from sane living here this morning."

Matt couldn't have told her what he was thinking. As he watched her stand there with the sunlight behind her, he was enraptured by the vague outline of her body through the skirt and blouse. "I was thinking," he told her in a distracted tone, "that I'll skip all the bargaining and offer you five thousand dollars for the Fiesta. This is very important to me. Please," he said softly. "You could complete my collection."

"Me?" she questioned impishly. Sweet heaven, Callie thought. For a second she'd

actually wished she was what he was talking about. "I thought you collected cars."

"That too," he said seriously. "A real collector never turns down a choice item, Callie Carmichael, even if it's something he's never collected before."

Matt geared the Corvette down to a respectable speed on the mountain road, and wondered who was more surprised at his decision to skip the company's weekly staff meeting and drive back to Sweet Valley—Phil, the secretaries, or himself. Breaking his own unwritten law, he'd turned the meeting over to his partner and taken off. He'd gone against everything in his conservative, serious nature by doing that.

But Callie Carmichael was different from anyone his conservative, serious nature had encountered before. She was not only sexy, but also down-to-earth and outrageous, different from any woman he'd dated, and certainly different from the woman who'd shared his name until a few years ago.

Callie dissained money and routine comforts, which amazed him. And she seemed to have some inner secret for living. That fact intrigued him. She'd threatened him, kissed him, and filled his heart with her laughter. He was more convinced than ever that she was a witch who'd cast a spell over him. He knew very little about her, and he intended to find out more.

Matt grinned. Somewhere along the line she'd formed a bad opinion of wealthy men. Maybe he'd teach her a lesson about making impetuous assumptions. Obviously he couldn't deal with her on a normal basis. If money and charm wouldn't change her mind about the Fiesta, he knew exactly what he intended to barter for the car. Himself.

"Callie? Caroline Carmichael? Are you home?"

The deep male voice blended into Callie's thoughts as she stretched grapevines onto a rack behind the house. She dropped her garden shears. Matt Holland. Callie started running, filled with an excitement that shocked her. She heard noises, then Matt's voice again.

"Get back inside that fence!" he yelled. "Don't you come a step closer, William. I'll ... William, you pain in the—William, don't you lay a horn on my car. *William!*"

Callie rounded the house in time to see William plant his feet and make a running attempt to remove Matt's shiny white Corvette from its spot in front of the herb garden.

William's head hit the grille with a thud. He stopped, shook his body, and revved up for another try. The second assault was more damaging. By the time Callie reached the road William had bent the grille into the radiator and water was puddling beneath the Corvette. One headlight was cracked, and there was a long scratch down the driver's side.

Callie gasped. Matt was furious. He stood in the driver's seat, out of William's way, his fists clenched as he looked from his prize automobile to William and back again. William seemed to be smiling in defiance. Matt was casually dressed—casual by his standards, she assumed—in sharply creased designer jeans and a yellow sports shirt. Callie thought he looked like a yuppie admiral sinking with his Corvette ship.

"Is this your idea of an apology for last week, you contemptible, smelly little bastard?" Matt asked William. "Has anyone ever told you that in some parts of this state the Jaycees hold goat barbecues?"

William's retort was something between the whinny of a horse and the traditional baa of the black sheep. His mouth moved as if he were chewing with great boredom. He ambled away. Callie walked slowly up to the Corvette.

"Matt. Oh, Matt. I'm so sorry. I don't know what's wrong with William. He's ornery, but he's never taken on anybody's car before."

Callie wished she hadn't been working all morning in the spring heat. She knew she was hot and sweaty and disheveled-looking in khaki shorts and a loose T-shirt. Matt eyed her speculatively, a muscle working in his jaw. Then he leaped gracefully out of the Corvette and grabbed her in a hug. She gasped out loud.

"Callie Carmichael, only you could make me forget what that hooved little cuss just did to my car." His voice caressed her senses long before his lips found hers.

"Why?" she whispered throatily against his mouth.

"Why what?" He moved his lips lightly over hers. He tasted of musky male allure and spring air. The smell of his fine cologne filled her, and little tremors rippled beneath her skin as her mouth opened beneath his touch.

Callie tried to protest. Her legs began to tremble as her bones seemed to melt into the earth in a warm puddle of jelly. She reached out to support herself and caught the edge of his sleek belt, which only had the effect of pulling him against her.

The sound of a horn stopped her from winding her arms around him. She felt Matt's reluctance to let her go, and she lowered her gaze from the raw need she read in his face as she stepped away. Grabbing the fence behind her, she held on, breathing deeply for a moment as the ground steadied beneath her feet. A pickup truck drove by, and Callie waved weakly at the grinning woman behind the wheel, a friend of hers from the valley.

"City men. I'd forgotten how impulsive and unpredictable you all are," she quipped. "Why did you do that, Matt?"

"Because I'm impulsive and unpredictable. And you enjoyed it." He'd planned to flirt with her, to build up the passion to a sensual level so he could get even with her for all the torment she'd caused him the week before. But when he'd seen her standing by the car, looking up at him with huge, sorrowful eyes, his plan had deserted him. "It definitely wasn't what I meant to do," he added. "There's something about you and that goat and this place that make me crazy."

He stopped and simply looked at her, and she felt the melting process begin again. Between the heat of the sun and Matt Holland's gaze, she felt a little light-headed.

"Come on the porch, Matt, out of the sun. I'll get us something cold to drink."

"Good idea. I think we both need cooling off."

"You need to tell me why you won't take no for an answer, sir. I thought I'd seen the end of you last week."

"I think you'll give in. That's why, ma'am." He emphasized "ma'am" in the same way she'd emphasized "sir."

She laughed lightly. "I hardly know you. And I won't sell Ruby, no matter what."

She left him sitting in a swing on the porch as she went straight for the refrigerator, opened the door, and leaned into its delicious coolness. She rested her forehead against the top of the refrigerator and closed her eyes.

Matt was wealthy, and she knew what that kind of wealth meant. It meant family obligations and expectations. It also meant superficiality and arrogance, no matter how carefully concealed beneath a pleasing exterior.

Her father was wealthy, and her mother was dead because of it. Even her ex-husband, sweet, gentle Tyler, had eventually been swayed by corporate interests and greed. It had destroyed their marriage.

"Callie? Need any help?" Matt called.

Heavens, yes, she mouthed, but against you—not from you.

"I'm very sorry about William," she began as she pushed open the screen door with her rear and backed onto the porch. She placed a tray with two glasses of iced tea on a wicker table. "I'll pay for the repairs to the Corvette."

"How?" he asked, a little coldly.

Callie looked up at him solemnly as he continued.

"You don't believe in making money, as I recall," he said.

"I'll pay you back, Matt. Even if it takes years."

He grimaced in self-rebuke at his mean streak. Her lack of interest in money was one of the most intriguing things about her.

"Don't worry about it," he said. She couldn't begin to afford the repairs. Parts for a 1963 Corvette were expensive, and the skilled labor required to install them was even more costly.

"I'll pay you back," she said again.

"Sell me the Fiesta and we'll call it even."

"I'll give you William," she said fiendishly.

"Let's discuss this later, Callie. Maybe in the next century."

Chuckling, Callie poured the tea and handed a glass to him, allowing herself really to look at him for the first time. He sat very straight and dignified in the creaking old swing. The jeans hugged his slim hips and muscular legs, and the buttercup-yellow shirt emphasized the gold of his hair. Spotless white running shoes completed his outfit. He looked expensive and casual, she noted.

"Something wrong?" Matt caught her slight frown instantly.

"Uh, no. I just haven't recovered from the shock of seeing you here today. I thought you'd given up on me."

"I brought something to show you. Look here."

He was holding something she hadn't noticed before. She hadn't noticed anything since he'd kissed her. Now, balancing the glass and some sort of brochure, he jerked his head slightly and smiled.

"Come here and sit beside me in the swing, unless you're afraid of me."

Callie held back for a moment. She didn't want to get close to him. Every time she got close to Matt Holland something happened. But she couldn't stand there stupidly. She

shrugged and gave him a taunting smile.

"I have William to protect me. I'm not afraid."

He groaned in mock horror at the thought of William as she sat down. Callie tried unsuccessfully not to come in contact with his body. "What is this?" she asked, pointing to the pamphlet in his large hand.

"This is an original sales piece on the Fiesta, sent out by one of the Oldsmobile dealers. See, here's one exactly like Ruby, except the color is blue." He motioned excitedly to a picture.

Callie was intrigued, and bent forward for a closer look. She saw a car very much like Ruby, only shiny and new and very elegant. She had heard the tremor of excitement in Matt's voice, and had to admit that the thought of Ruby being restored to resemble the marvelous car in the photograph was thrilling. Sitting beside Matt was even more thrilling.

"Isn't she a beauty?" he whispered. Callie glanced up and found him staring at her instead of the brochure. She looked away quickly. He cleared his throat and shuffled the brochure. "This Fiesta's surf blue in front with teal blue on the back," he continued doggedly. "Ruby's color is called raven red and super white."

"I expected to see scantily clad, beautiful women in this brochure," Callie said teasingly. "Draped over the Fiesta like cats on a warm ledge. Didn't sex sell products back then?"

"After the act you pulled on me the other day, you're asking me if sex sells?" Matt shook his head and grinned.

Callie frowned at him. "Do you think I'm wanton?" she asked primly. Before he could answer she added, "I'm not. Believe me, you were the recipient of a one-time-only act."

"I'm disappointed," he said jokingly. "I wanted you to be wanton."

Callie couldn't resist his impish teasing, and she smiled. He smiled back. "Everyone isn't as poor a salesman, pardon me, saleswoman as me," she told him. "On the other hand, I'm sure there aren't many men with the sales resistance you have."

His brown eyes grew somber. "My resistance was motivated by conservative morals," he assured her. "But even a conservative man like me can only stand so much." His voice dropped. "I want to get to know you, Callie. I want to get to know you very, very well, and then I won't put up any resistance at all."

She could barely breathe. "Maybe once you know the facts about me, you'll have no trouble resisting."

He cocked one brow in defiance. "I'm a very good judge of character. I can always tell the quality of a paint at first glance—"

"And what am I ... a nice rosewood exterior oil base?" she asked lightly.

Matt felt uncomfortable as he realized how silly his analogy had sounded. "I meant," he replied emphatically, "that I look beneath the surface of everything—paint, people, material goods. I look for quality, for old-fashioned values, for durability. I saw all those things in you."

"I don't peel and I won't crack, even in cold weather."

"Callie, I'm trying to be serious!" He was clearly exasperated with her, and she patted

his arm in a gesture of apology.

"Thank you for the compliment," she murmured. "As you can tell, I have trouble taking your attention seriously. Why would a man like you find a carefree bum like me interesting? To you I must seem like some sort of ... hippie."

He laughed. "That term went out of vogue a few years ago."

"Not in this part of Georgia, it didn't," she told him. "Every time I run off to take part in a protest or work on a political campaign or whatever, John Henry says I'm just a 'dadgum flower-child punk hippie.' "

"Do you do that often?" he asked. "Run off?"

She nodded. "Last week I spent two days in Atlanta, picketing in front of the IsoTech corporate headquarters to protest their involvement in South Africa."

His eyes widened. "You were in Atlanta? I wish I'd known."

"Why? Would you have come down and joined in the protest?" she asked with a sardonic smile.

He raised both brows in an expression of reproach. "You protest your way, I'll protest in mine."

"And what way is that?" she asked, her chin up.

"I've sold all my Krugerrands and every piece of stock I owned in companies with South African interests. I donated the receipts to an organization dedicated to a peaceful, productive settlement of the problems there."

Callie stared at him with sudden respect. She had misjudged him, at least in some ways. "I'm very impressed," she said softly.

He shrugged. "All us rich folks aren't ogres, you know. I donate a lot of money to good causes. Probably some of the same ones you work for."

Her eyes twinkled. "Like 'Save the Pink-Tipped Gumpwhupper,' or whatever it was you mentioned the other day?"

Matt nodded, laughing.

She looked away, idly studying her fingers as she traced patterns in the moisture on her tea glass. Matt Holland was one very interesting fellow.

"About the car, Matt," she said quietly. "Tell me what you know about Fiestas. I'm interested."

"In just the Fiesta?" he asked with a devilish tone.

She studied him with a rueful smile. "Yes. The Fiesta."

He sighed in comical defeat, and abruptly took her hand in his. He held it on his knee. "I'll talk only if you let me hold your hand," he said firmly.

Callie laughed. "You've got about one minute; then I take my hand back."

He nodded. "As far as I know there were only three or four pieces of literature ever printed on the Fiesta. Oldsmobile only manufactured the car for five months."

He went into an excited description of the various options and color schemes listed for the automobile, while Callie's mind went into a different kind of rapture. Her hand was still on his thigh. She could feel the tightness of his leg muscles play beneath her hand, while his thumb circled her palm seductively.

"I'm sorry," he finally said. "I know I get carried away. Of all the cars in my

collection, this one will be the most special.”

“Matt,” Callie began seriously, drawing her hand out of his grip, “I don’t want you to get your hopes up. I have no intention of selling my car. You see, it’s very special to me too. It belonged to someone I cared deeply about.”

Something in her voice caught at him, and he saw the pain that flashed across her face. “I’m sorry. I get carried away. I’m being insensitive,” he murmured. Matt closed the brochure and turned to look at Callie. “And pushy. I thought if I could make you understand how special the car is, you’d understand how important it is to me. My collection will be complete once I acquire it. I’ll give it the best of care.”

“I’m sorry, Matt. I can’t let you have Ruby. I’m sorry she’s valuable. I wish she weren’t, but that doesn’t matter. You see, the car belonged to my mother. It’s the only thing I have left that belonged to her, and I’m not going to sell it, no matter what you offer me.”

“Your mother?” He was embarrassed. Worse than that, he felt like some kind of con man trying to swindle a little old lady’s life savings away from her. “Your mother drove this car?”

“Yes. At least I was told she did, for a while.”

“I don’t understand. I thought it had been stored for about thirty years. The odometer shows less than sixteen thousand miles.”

“And I’ve put most of those miles on Ruby in the year I’ve been driving her. My mother … my mother didn’t drive her for long.”

“Tell me about your mother, Callie. Why is this car the only thing you have of hers?”

“Because it was the only thing that money didn’t destroy. She left it behind when she married my father. She left it for a white Cadillac and a twenty-room house on Riverside Drive, and plastic surgery to make her beautiful enough to match her surroundings.” Callie hugged herself hard and looked toward the mountains as if seeking solace. “Finish your tea, Matt, and I’ll call John Henry to come up and look at your car.”

“Who are you, Callie?” he asked softly. “Tell me how you ended up here, and what you did before you came here.”

She looked at him shrewdly for a moment. When she spoke, her voice was low and without emotion. “I have a master’s in English from Emory University, in Atlanta. In between semesters at Emory I married my first real sweetheart, Tyler. He was nineteen; I was eighteen.” She smiled grimly. “We planned to save the Pink-Tipped Gumpwhuppers and everything else that needed saving.”

“And?” Matt prodded.

“For six years Tyler and I gave the effort our best shot. We traveled, held various jobs—we both taught high school English for a while—and worked for our causes. Then Tyler bought a three-piece suit and went corporate on me. We divorced two years ago. Last year I came here to live with Gramps, looking for something—peace of mind, I suppose. I found it.”

Matt exhaled. “The lady has an interesting background,” he said in a soft voice tinged with awe. “Tell me about your mother.”

She shook her head and smiled sadly. “This is starting to sound like a soap opera, and

I hate melodrama. Let's go call John Henry. He can probably work on your car right here in the yard. At least he can fix it well enough for you to drive back to Atlanta."

"What about William?" Matt asked glumly.

"John Henry doesn't repair goats."

He shoved her gently in payment for the bad joke, and they both chuckled.

"I mean, will it be safe to let him wander around the place once John Henry arrives?" Matt asked.

"William?" Callie repeated. "Oh, he's fairly safe with everyone but you. He just seems to have a potent and unusual dislike for you and your Corvette." She arched one brow. "Perhaps he senses that you could disturb the whole flow of my life and his."

Matt nodded, his eyes solemn. "Perhaps he's right."

"Well," John Henry drawled as he walked around and around the Corvette, scratching his head thoughtfully, "I reckon I can fix it, but it'll take a couple days."

"Mr. Webster," Matt began patiently, "I don't think you quite understand. This is a 1963 Corvette. They don't make parts for this car anymore."

"Oh, I see. What you don't understand, son, is that I worked on all these old cars when they was new. I know them like I know my own children. I worked on these, here, Corvettes back when a mechanic 'repaired' a car. Nowadays all we do is replace parts. Why, I remember once, a fellow ..."

Callie left Matt listening in fascination as John Henry talked of bearings and gears and custom body work. She went back in the cabin, knowing that Matt would be occupied for some time. Once John Henry got wound up, he could go on about mechanics for hours. She wondered if Matt would be able to stay awake during John Henry's long-playing reminiscences.

He did. Every time she looked out the window she saw Matt and John Henry talking and smiling. She soon became convinced that Matt was genuinely interested in what he was hearing. He even seemed to be telling John Henry bits of information that the old man obviously found fascinating. Callie noticed that John Henry's ever-present toothpick had ceased to migrate from one corner of his mouth to the other. She knew that anytime his toothpick grew still, John Henry was concentrating.

Callie picked English peas from her garden, then shelled them and put them on the stove to cook. Drying her hands on a cotton dish cloth, she glanced out the window and saw that Matt had donned a pair of greasy, well-used coveralls. Shocked, she dropped the towel on the floor.

"The city slicker's bewitched," she said out loud and grinned.

He towered over John Henry's six feet by another six inches, and the coveralls fit enticingly well, so she knew they were Matt's own. They were worn in all the right places, like in the rear and across the thighs. When Matt squatted down to help John Henry unbolt the battered headlight, Callie was so preoccupied with watching him that she dropped the dish towel again, this time into the pot of peas.

Some time later they pushed the Corvette out of William's domain, to the other side of the pasture fence that ran along her driveway. The last she saw of Matt and John Henry

was a cloud of red dust as they sped down the driveway in John Henry's ancient truck.

They took a fork in the road that went to a neighbor's house. Callie leaned on a window ledge and watched the truck bounce over the rutted road and out of sight toward Tom Hicks's farm. Why did she get the feeling that Matt Holland was completely at home with John Henry? More surprises from her yuppie. Her yuppie? Frowning, Callie went back to the kitchen.

When suppertime arrived Callie went looking for the two men. She found them under Tom Hicks's rusty tractor, arguing the merits of trying to fix it, not the Corvette. Tom sat beside the tractor, looking woeful.

"Are you two planning to eat tonight?" Callie asked. She leaned on the fender of John Henry's truck as the two men crawled out from under the tractor. They both looked sheepish.

"Say," Matt told her, "John Henry really knows his equipment. This tractor was built in 1929, and it's still running. At least, it was running until yesterday. People really knew how to build things back then."

There was a smear of grease across his cheek, and his hair fell across his forehead in a little-boy fashion that made Callie want to reach out and brush it back.

"Yep, and it's held together with bailing wire and safety pins and takes more time to crank than it's worth," Tom Hicks noted. A short, bespectacled man in jeans and a T-shirt, he sat cross-legged with a hound dog puppy in his lap. Callie smiled at him.

"When are you going to trade this old bolt bucket in, Tom, and get something modern?"

"Well," he drawled, "I hate to admit that I need a new machine. Owning the oldest tractor on God's green earth is a point of pride with me." Everyone laughed. "But if I could talk the tractor dealer over in Dahlonega into extending me credit on my flock of spring broiling hens, I'd be plowing this ground instead of sitting on it."

Matt and John Henry began simultaneously.

"Tom, I could—" Matt said.

"Tom, I'd be glad to—"

Tom stopped them with raised hands. "Thanks, but no thanks. A tractor on the showroom floor already has my name on it. All I have to do is get my crop of baby chicks raised and sold, and I'll have a down payment. I just need to get one more month of work out of this old relic and I'll make it."

Callie looked at Matt in mock rebuke. "I get the impression you've been tinkering with Tom's tractor all this time, instead of trying to find parts for the Corvette. Are you always so irresponsible?"

He blushed. Just as I suspected, Callie thought. You haven't had many irresponsible moments in your life, have you, Matt?

"You bring out the worst in me," he told her.

"Hmmm. The best, maybe." Callie tilted her chin up proudly, and they smiled at each other.

John Henry put a fresh toothpick in his mouth. "Well," he muttered, "don't matter whether we work on the Corvette today or not. Can't be fixed till I get the parts, and

that won't be till tomorrow, at least." He pulled something out of the tractor's inner workings and directed his next words to Tom. "I'll fix this carburetor for you tonight." Tom nodded. Callie noted the extremely innocent expression on John Henry's face as he turned his gaze on her. "Got any ideas about where we can put Matt up for the night, Callie?"

Callie was startled. She hadn't thought past supper. She glanced at Matt, and he made a great show of looking benignly unconcerned about where he spent the night.

"Don't go to any trouble on my account," he said quaintly.

She arched one brow at him and "hmmphed." John Henry's voice interrupted her errant thoughts concerning where she'd like Matt to sleep.

"What about the smokehouse, where all those freaky friends of yours stay when they come to visit?" he asked. "Haven't you got at least one decent bed in there?" John Henry took a disreputable-looking cotton handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his face. Callie was sure he was hiding a smile.

She turned to Matt. "I've seen mice in the smokehouse," she intoned solemnly. "Giant mice. With fangs. Would you be scared?"

"After William, even vampire mice would seem sweet." He paused, gauging the troubled look she gave him. "I can find a motel room until I can get the hole in the Corvette radiator plugged. I wouldn't want your neighbors to think you were keeping me for illicit purposes." He wiggled his brows in a devilish way. "Immoral, tawdry purposes." He paused again for effect. "I'd be safe from you, wouldn't I?"

She gave him a wry smile. "Without a doubt."

Liar, she chided herself silently. He'll never be completely safe from me. I know that already.

"Don't worry, Matt," John Henry interjected. " 'Twas William who made the hole, so I'm sure Callie wouldn't allow you to stay anywhere but her place. It's only common courtesy for her to put you up for the night. Just don't be surprised if you wind up sharing the place with some weirdly dressed, hippified stranger."

Callie shot a look of exasperation at John Henry. "My friends are lovely, free-spirited people." She turned to Matt. "Tyler and I met a lot of wonderful folks in our travels. From time to time they drop by here to spend the night."

"Are they ... homeless?" Matt asked. She shook her head.

"They consider the whole world their home. They work when they need to, they travel, they enjoy life. They don't ask for handouts, if that's what you mean. They pay their way."

"They don't take baths," John Henry added. "They smell worse than William."

"Nothing could smell worse than William," Matt said emphatically. He looked at Callie. "I'll stay, and take my chances."

She nodded. "John Henry, you drop us back at my cabin," she told him. "Want to stay for dinner?"

"No, thanks," he drawled. "You've probably spent all afternoon making some more of those lovely alfalfa sprouts." He gestured toward the truck. "Let's go. I'll order the parts for the Corvette and come back tomorrow."

"Thanks, John Henry," Matt told him. They shared a firm handshake. "It's been a pleasure. Are you sure that prune juice will work on my problem?"

"Prune juice?" Callie asked a few minutes later, when she and Matt were alone outside the old smokehouse. "What did you say about prune juice?"

"Damnedest thing," he answered. "John Henry swears he uses it as a lubricator when he's tuning up a car. I can't imagine its loosening a stuck bolt."

"Neither can I," she observed wryly. "Matt, you can't take everything John Henry says seriously."

"Oh? Then I should overlook his observation that you're glad to see me?"

"He told you that?"

"Yes." Matt looked down at her, his dark eyes gleaming. "After I'm gone tomorrow, when he tells you that I'm crazy about you and this weird mountain life of yours, believe him." He let her absorb that blunt comment for a moment. Then he smiled. "Having a man stay here alone with you won't tarnish your reputation with the locals, will it?"

Callie laughed. "People in the valley mind their own business, Matt, except for John Henry, who minds everybody's. I wouldn't stick around if I couldn't live my life the way I want to."

They stepped inside the smokehouse, and she flicked the switch on an old wall plate.

"You're big on being free, aren't you?" Matt persisted while he glanced around and took a tentative sniff. This wasn't so bad. "How do you really support yourself up here?"

"With kudzu and muscadine baskets and wreaths."

"A lot of people buy those things?"

"Yes. I have a good reputation for craftsmanship." Callie moved finished baskets off one of the cots.

Matt looked around. This was going to be interesting. An overhead fixture with one bare bulb gave enough light to identify the furniture. There was the daybed, which appeared to be long enough for his frame, a rocking chair, a workbench, and a table.

"Not too bad," he admitted.

"Lacey gave me the rocking chair. It adds a lot."

"Who's Lacey?"

"Lacey is an old friend," Callie said. She smiled. "And she's not a 'hippiefied' person and she doesn't smell bad."

"Tell me more about your ex-husband, Tyler."

"Nope. Ruins my appetite." She said the words without malice as she straightened the clutter around Matt's bed. Callie looked up into his puzzled, brooding eyes. "I'm kidding. Tyler decided to direct his life down a different path from mine, that's all. He's still one of the sweetest people I know. Just misguided." She gave him a defiant, inquisitive look. "Now let me ask a question. Have you ever been married?"

He nodded, his expression solemn. "A long time ago. It only lasted two years."

Callie's eyes narrowed, and she asked in a voice that was frank without being nasty, "What went wrong?"

Matt answered just as frankly. "I bored her to tears." His expression hardened, but

Callie sensed the deep defeat he still felt.

"Matthew," she said gently, "you may be quaint and businesslike, but you couldn't possibly be classified as 'boring' by any female."

A slight smile edged his mouth. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

"Go on with your story." She shifted, uncomfortable under the intense, affectionate gaze he was giving her.

"I came home one day and found a note." He smiled without warmth. "It was very elegant and very melodramatic. Just the sort of thing you dislike."

"Please," Callie said, her voice gentle, "I hear the pain in your voice. Don't think I'm going to make fun of you. Tell me the rest."

Matt cast his gaze down. "Glenda said she was bored with my antiques and my love for history and all the time I devoted to the paint company. She'd found a man who 'embraced life and lived in the present.' "

Callie touched his arm, and he looked up, his emotions wrapped in dignity. "I'm sorry," she told him. He nodded. "Matt, did she find what she wanted when she married someone new? Were they happy?"

"No. I believe he lasted even less time than I did."

"You must have loved her dearly. I can tell by how hurt you sound, even now."

He shrugged and tried to joke. "She believes in marriages with 'built-in obsolescence.' Two years or your money back, guaranteed." Callie stood mesmerized under his searching eyes. He looked desperate. "I don't want to bore any more women to tears."

A feeling of tenderness dampened her eyes and made her give him a kind smile. He was, in a subtle way, very vulnerable. She liked that.

"Holland," she murmured, shaking her head, "you exasperate me, surprise me, and worry me. You don't bore me. So relax."

He gave her a jaunty smile and chucked her lightly under the chin. "Tell me more about Tyler." His momentary anguish was gone, replaced by confidence and control.

"Hah," she answered. "Don't change the subject." They shared a benignly challenging look for a moment. "Dinner," she ordered. "It's getting late."

"Right," he said finally, in a tone that let her know he planned to ask about her ex-husband again later.

Matt filed Tyler away under subjects to be examined at his leisure. For now, he was too intrigued by the smokehouse. Every spare space in the room was taken up with vines, ribbons, and bright bolts of fabric, a kaleidoscope of warm colors. He lifted two very large baskets lined with the bright fabric and carried them outside, depositing them beside a stack Callie obviously had been working on recently.

"What do people use these for?" he wanted to know.

"Oh, to hold magazines, or wood, or pine cones. They usually put them beside their fireplaces for decoration."

"Won't William eat them if we leave them here?"

"What, eat roots and vines, like other goats? Not William. He prefers more tasty morsels." She ringed her arms with the last of the door wreaths and stood looking around the room. "Your accommodations, sir, are prepared. I'll give you linen and a

pillow later. Let's go have dinner."

"You mean William only destroys automobiles and wildflowers?"

"And other things that I won't mention. Just don't leave this door open if you want to have a complete set of clothes in the morning."

Matt whistled as he followed her to the cabin. Maybe he'd lose his clothes some other way tonight.

Four

The rising sun was beginning to turn the sky a soft lavender when Matt finally gave up on the daybed and on any hope of sleep. He pulled on the old gray shorts he'd found behind the bed, obviously left by one of Callie's friends. The shorts were too snug, but they'd do for a little while.

Wearing his white undershirt and his jogging shoes, he padded outside. There was a cool, crisp freshness in the air, and Matt sat on the smokehouse steps, taking in the tranquility of the valley.

Even though the dawn was lovely, he didn't want to be out there to see it. He wanted to be inside Callie's cabin. After the night before, a night of good food and good conversation and laughter, he wanted to be in her oversized bed, under the bright-colored quilt. The woman had all sorts of save-the-something-or-other posters on her bedroom walls, but he didn't care. It looked like a cozy, cheerful place. He wanted to be cuddling that freckled body with the full breasts.

Matt felt a wave of regret catch at the muscles in his stomach and tighten them into a shivery knot. He had to stop thinking about Callie as if he were some ... some love sick goat.

"Arrrgh. I don't want to think about goats," he muttered, looking around carefully for William.

Matt tied the laces on his shoes. Groaning at the thought of the upcoming activity, he stood up and jogged, loose-limbed, across the yard to the driveway. He stopped and turned, jogging in place while he took a look back at Callie's cabin.

He was immediately reminded of a Christmas-card catalog he'd gotten the year before from a company in Oklahoma. The cards carried a western theme of mountains, rustic cabins, and sanctified wilderness.

He was always drawn to the scenes because of the permanence and peacefulness they pictured. Now, here in a little valley at the base of a mountain chain in north Georgia, he prayed that permanence and peace had come to life for him.

Callie was frying thick slices of country ham when she heard footsteps outside the back door. "Come on in the kitchen. Breakfast is almost ready," she called.

"I assume you're talking to me, not William," Matt answered.

"Oh, William doesn't like ham. He never eats anything he's known personally, and this ham came from a pig of Tom Hicks's. You want orange juice or my specialty?"

Getting no answer, she turned around. Matt stood in the doorway, his head cocked at an angle and a humorous look in his eyes that told her he was considering a rakish answer to her question.

"Good morning," he said slowly.

Her heart skipped a beat and her knees quivered at the sight he presented.

"Good morning," she finally managed to say.

His light-colored hair was damp and thick. He filled the doorway, and his head barely cleared the top frame. His T-shirt clung to the muscles that rippled in his stomach as he raked his fingers through his hair.

And the shorts. Oh, dear. Callie forced her gaze away from their brevity. They barely covered the essentials, and the slits in the sides hinted at the hollows in his lean haunches. Those shorts were definitely not boring. Definitely not.

"Your specialty?" he asked in a throaty voice that made her feel suddenly warm all over.

"My special apple juice," she explained hastily. "Red apples grown right here in the valley, canned by Tom Hicks's wife last fall."

He peered at the stove. "What, no alfalfa sprouts?"

"Now, look, I fed you pot roast and mashed potatoes and peas with butter last night, so you know I'm not a fanatic about health food. Sit down, city slicker."

He settled on a rickety stool and watched her as if she'd hypnotized him. Which she had.

She was wearing a short culottes outfit in a bright cotton print. The leg hems and the edges of the sleeveless bodice were decorated with ruffles. Her thick hair tangled with the bodice ruffles in an enchanting way. The outfit must have been out of style for ten years, Matt thought, and on any other woman it would have looked silly. On Callie it looked great.

"Sleep well?" she asked.

"No." He made himself sound comically disgruntled. "I dreamed about William. I wanted to dream about you."

"What did William do?"

"He was in my garage in Atlanta. He methodically bashed each of my antique cars. They were covered with wildflowers, and he ate the flowers before he left. He had a laugh just like Walter Brennan's. It was a nightmare all right."

Callie giggled so hard that she had to put her spatula down for a moment. Wiping her eyes, she gazed at Matt tenderly.

"You made all of that up, you disgusting liar," she told him with glee. "What an imagination you have. That's great."

Matt grinned at her. He had never considered himself an imaginative person. Her compliment flattered him immensely.

"Thanks."

He continued to enjoy the sight of her. The short, wide legs of the culottes proved to him that he had an active imagination; in fact, an overactive imagination. She poured a small glass of apple juice, placed it before him, and turned back to the stove.

He watched her move around the kitchen. There was an intimacy between them, a warm, gentle feeling of friendship, even though it was new and still fragile.

The night before, he'd wanted to make love to her, and she'd known it. He'd wanted her in the swing beside him, nestled against the curve of his shoulder, her thick, dark hair tickling the base of his chin as they moved slowly back and forth. That was what

he'd planned.

He'd gracefully gotten her out to the porch, even had her sitting by him in the swing, when a sudden invasion of mosquitos big enough to carry off William descended, and they'd been forced to end the evening. She'd given him a flashlight and a rueful smile that said she had her own regrets.

"Sorry you didn't sleep well," she told him now. "Was the bed awful?"

"No. But at about three A.M. I debated whether to elope with Ruby."

She chuckled. "What stopped you?"

"The fear that I'd encounter William if I went outside the smokehouse." They both laughed. "So what's on for today?" he asked, taking a swallow of the crisp, cold fruit juice. "This is great. Tastes like cinnamon."

"Well, as a guest, you're on your own for a while. I have to clean out the barn. The garden needs fertilizing."

"I see. Nothing like good physical labor to work out my city tensions. Good idea."

"Your help isn't necessary, Holland. I don't think you've had a lot of experience with cow manure."

"You're right, Carmichael, but I can learn."

"It's very old manure. You love old things, so maybe you'll want to collect a sample to take home."

"Hah."

Smiling, Callie placed an oversized red plate filled with scrambled eggs and ham on the counter beside him, then sat down on a stool nearby, with her own plate. On the counter between them she placed a plate of buttered toast and a large mason jar of luscious-looking preserves.

"Dig in, Matthew. The bread's homemade. The eggs are courtesy of Esmeralda, the ham you already know about, and the homemade strawberry preserves are courtesy of William."

"Wait a minute. I can understand everything else, but what does William have to do with the preserves?"

"Last year he ate all the strawberry plants, so I didn't have any preserves. This year I fixed the garden gate so he couldn't get to the strawberries. I have to keep him away from the preserves too."

Matt took a thick slice of toast and spread it generously with the thick, sweet berries. "Does he prefer preserves on toast, or straight from the jar?"

"Oh, he likes them straight out of the jar if he can get into the jars when I'm cooling them on the windowsill. I learned about his sweet tooth when he knocked off half of my first batch."

"What else do you do, Callie? You garden. You're an artist. You obviously sew, if all the matching cushions and quilts around here are any indication, and you cook like a dream." Matt chewed the salty ham and swallowed it with obvious relish. "Has it occurred to you that you'd be a perfect mail-order bride for some settler from the early west?"

"Mail-order bride?" she chortled. "I've been called a lot of things, Matthew Holland,

but never a mail-order bride. Tell me about you. About your house in Atlanta. About all the girlfriends I'm sure you must entertain there."

Matt blinked. The intrusion of his Atlanta life into the cozy kitchen was wrenching. He lifted his shoulders uneasily.

"Go on, tell me," she insisted. "Suppose we were eating breakfast at your house. Tell me where we'd be sitting. You do live somewhere, don't you? Let me see." She licked her lips and stared off into space. "You have the penthouse apartment in that elegant building near the Peachtree Plaza downtown. Or ... you have one of those big, old-money homes off West Paces Ferry in Buckhead."

"No," he retorted, "not even close. I live in a new-money house I built up in Roswell. Very suburban. And in the summer, when I eat at home, I usually eat at a glass-topped table by the pool."

"Ah-hah! I knew it. By the pool. And you eat fresh fruit, croissants, and eggs benedict."

She took a bite of egg, and Matt lost his train of thought for a moment as he watched the motion of her lips. "No, I usually eat shredded wheat and milk, the same thing I've been eating all my adult life."

"Ah, continuity and regimentation, of course. And I'll bet while you eat you watch the gardener as he tends your roses and flower beds. And I'll bet you have a housekeeper and at least one maid. And a Jacuzzi. You shop at the best places, only Lenox Square or the Galleria. You never, ever ride public transportation. You order all your Christmas presents from the Neiman-Marcus catalogue, or from some upscale mail order outfit like the Banana Republic."

The sharp scrutiny in her blue eyes was softened by an impish smile. Matt was annoyed that she understood his life-style so well.

"Go on," he told her. "You're accurate—I'll admit it. I feel like I'm from a family of insects you've studied all your life."

"Ah, the 'Furry-Legged Up-and-Coming Money-Maker,'" she said without malice, nodding. "I come from the same family. That's why I understand the habitat so well."

"But you don't have furry legs," Matt pointed out drolly. No, she had incredibly smooth-looking legs, he added in silent appreciation. They begged for a man's touch.

"Ah, but I mutated from the family, you see," she explained, smiling. "I lost the characteristics."

"What are the sexual habits of my breed?" Matt asked, leaning toward her and smiling coyly. "Can I make whoopee with members of the mutant order?"

Callie's eyes turned darker. "That remains to be seen." After a potent moment of silence, she looked away and began slicing the ham on her plate.

"So," she murmured. "After breakfast you take a swim in your Olympic-sized pool, then you put on your silk suit and have your chauffeur drive you into town, where you have an office on an upper floor of some huge glass tower that reflects the sun like a mirror."

Matt finished the last bite of his ham and shook his head. "Wrong. I drive myself, and my office is in the paint plant, over in the industrial section of west Atlanta. Hardly

anybody ever sees it. And many times I find myself wearing coveralls. My big lunch-time hobby is scraping paint from under my fingernails."

He playfully whirled a piece of toast at her, and she caught it. "When I do have a visitor," Matt continued, "he or she is taken to a special reception area to wait while I put on my silk suit and pointy-toed shoes. I work, Callie Carmichael, and I work damned hard, right alongside my employees. My father left me money, so I can't claim to be a self-made millionaire. But he didn't leave me success or a good reputation. I made those things myself."

Callie lowered her eyes to escape the tense, defiant look he gave her. "I see," she murmured, and cleared her throat. "Now. About your girlfriends. Shall I tell you what I suspect about the social life you lead, Mr. Holland?"

"I wouldn't miss your wild theories for the world. Go ahead."

She indicated his tight shorts with a slight nod in their direction. "Dressed in alluring and highly masculine jogging clothes, you trot along the quaint suburban roads of your native Roswell. Fashionable women, some mere college girls and others of full maturity, get cricks in their necks and nearly cause traffic accidents as they drive past you, craning to stare. Some do more than stare. They stop; they flirt."

She paused, leaned her chin on one hand, and looked him steadily in the eye. "You meet them later, at chic contemporary bars and intimate restaurants. After one or two respectable dinners, perhaps a night at the Academy Theater or a concert at the Fox, you invite them home. The gardener, the housekeeper, and the maid are discreet. They're accustomed to seeing you and your lady friend of the day at breakfast. It's no big deal. None at all."

Matt took a long sip of his apple juice. Callie could feel the tension he radiated. Finally, he turned dark, purposeful eyes on her.

"I've had some wonderful relationships with kind, loving women," he said softly. "I'm not a hermit, but I'm not promiscuous, either. I'm often accused of being old-fashioned by my male contemporaries." His voice dropped to a lower, taut level. "And I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't sneer at me as if I'm a hedonistic playboy. Like most women, you think all men are heartless and superficial about sex. Well, I'm not."

Callie realized that her face was hot and that she felt ashamed of herself. She realized something else too. He wasn't angry as much as he was hurt. She had hurt him. "I apologize, Matthew," she said sincerely. It was very important to her—for reasons she didn't want to analyze yet—that she not hurt him. "I'm ... I'm a turkey," she added.

She looked so glum and so intense about the fact that she was a turkey, Matt's anger faded away. He chuckled, squinting his eyes shut as he did so. He shook his head.

"Callie, this is a dumb conversation, and it's giving me indigestion. Let's change the subject." When he looked at her again, she nodded eagerly.

"Exercise," he said. "That's a good, safe subject. Do you like to run?"

"No. I'm much too lazy. Walking? Now, that's another story, provided it's done slowly and you take the time to experience new things along the way."

Matt reached across the table and wiped a smear of strawberries from the edge of her upper lip with his fingertip. Callie drew a soft, rough breath. He continued to touch her.

"Matt, you make me want to take up running. I think I could do the fifty-yard dash in three seconds right now." All she could think of was the rough texture of his finger against her sensitive skin as he traced the outline of her mouth, teasing the corners as though he wanted her to open it. There was an intensity in his eyes that turned the usual brown to a beautiful hickory-nut color.

"No, don't run," he urged. "Callie, consider this one of those new experiences you're so fond of." His thumb began to move in slow motion as he traced little circles at the corners of her lips. "I'm absolutely crazy about you, you know." He leaned forward and began to lower his head toward her.

For a moment she waited, drinking in the heady male scent of him, awakening an aching yearning that she wanted so badly to give in to. She lifted her lips, ready to meet his dangerous invitation boldly, when a warning "baa" destroyed the silence.

"William!" she cried. She heard a banging sound, the sound of the door's screen stretching and the frame cracking. Callie jumped up and watched the white goat ram the kitchen door once more. "Stop that this instant! What's gotten into you?"

He snorted and backed off the porch, shaking his head. Callie watched, speechless, as he trotted away. Beside her, Matt buried his face in his hands.

"You have a goat chaperone." He moaned. Then he began to chuckle. "I can fight every obstacle except William." He sounded comically undone. "I'm being victimized by a prudish goat!" Matt sank back onto his stool, and Callie went back to hers. They shook their heads simultaneously, and she began to laugh along with him.

After breakfast, Matt took her grandfather's old straight-edge razor and a bar of soap. He went off, whistling, to the water spigot. Callie watched him swish the razor blade through the air in a figure eight.

"Come on, you crazy little goat!" he yelled in a maniacal tone. "I'll carve you into goat burgers!"

"Pretty brave talk!" Callie yelled after him, "since William's in the pen!"

Matt turned around and bowed deeply. He drew himself up in a gallant pose. "M'lady," he called, "'tis for the best! God didn't mean for a poor dumb beast to fight a duel."

She couldn't resist. "Or for goats to, either!"

"Arrrgh!" he groaned, and clasped a hand to his wounded heart. Staggering, he turned and made his way toward the spigot while she laughed.

Callie went into the kitchen and stacked the breakfast dishes. She hadn't had so much fun in a long time. The thought sobered her. Their relationship was getting involved, and she'd only known Matt for a couple of days.

All logic told her that this man was trouble. He was everything she had turned her back on years ago. She'd see if she couldn't hurry John Henry along on the Corvette's repairs.

"There must be something psychic about that goat," Matt said when he came back, freshly shaved. "The way he interrupts things."

"Not psychic, spoiled. He's waiting for his coffee and toast. I share mine with him every morning." Callie spoke slowly as she placed a slice of toast in the bottom of a pan

and poured milk, sugar, and coffee over it.

"Don't I get any?"

"You want me to make a bowl of this for you?"

"No, but I'd like a cup of coffee."

"It's on the stove. Help yourself." She smiled crookedly at him, took the pan, and went outside.

Matt watched her go, and his chest swelled with pride. She was magnificent. Perfect, in both body and spirit. "Oh, Callie," he murmured under his breath. "The plans I have for us. The plans I have."

Shoveling cow dung was not part of his plans, but he made the best of it. He shoveled manure from the barn into a wheelbarrow and moved it to the garden, where Callie spread it across the freshly plowed rows. Every time they went back into the barn for another load of manure he sighed at the sight of the old red Fiesta.

"Next week I'll till all this into the soil. Then I'll plant my summer crops," she explained. She knelt on the ground and lovingly cupped a handful of soil. "It'll be a good year. A great year."

"What will you plant?" Matt caught the bottom of his shirt and pulled it up to wipe the perspiration from his face. This was the best workout he'd had in years. I'm a lean, mean shoveling machine, he thought wryly.

"Corn and beans." Callie stood up and followed his example, leaning over to use the bottom of her culottes to blot the moisture from her forehead.

Matt stifled a sigh of ecstasy. She had no idea how much thigh she revealed when she bent forward like that. "Too bad we don't have a swimming pool. I could use a dip in some ice water about now," he told her.

"Come on. I have just the solution, swimming country style."

She led him to a fieldstone well behind the barn. It was shaded by a white gazebo that was overrun by a green vine with clusters of purple flowers hanging heavily from it.

"You let the bucket down," she instructed. She began removing the well's wooden cover.

"Water from right out of the ground. This is terrific," he said, his eyes wide.

"Long ago, all water come from the ground, old legend say," Callie deadpanned, doing her best Hollywood Indian voice. "Then great spirit make water come from bottles. Him call it Terrier.' "

"Oh, can it, Carmichael."

She held the bucket out, and he took it, enjoying the damp heat of her skin when their hands touched.

"Bet you don't know diddly about drawing water," she said teasingly.

"I didn't know anything about cow manure two hours ago, but from the smell of me, I'm an expert on the subject now."

Matt felt the bucket hit the surface of the water and slowly begin to sink. When the rope began to tug against his hands he pulled it gently. A rusty pulley creaked overhead as he gathered the rope into his hands.

Callie thought she'd never seen such a magnificent male body as she watched him work. Every muscle in his torso came into play. He'd worked in the garden with an easy skill she hadn't expected. Once again he'd surprised her, adapting to her life with enthusiasm. She was willing to bet that he'd never picked up a shovel in his life, yet he'd loaded wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of fertilizer without complaint.

"Okay, my lady farmer, what now?"

"Leave the bucket on the ledge, sit down on that bench, and take off your shoes."

Matt complied, wondering if she planned to wash his feet. How quaint, he thought. It must be an old mountain custom. Just as he relaxed in anticipation he felt icy water cascade over his head and down his body like a great tidal wave straight out of the Arctic Ocean. The well water was so cold, it took his breath away.

"Great glaciers!" he yelled. "Do you have a pipeline to the North Pole?"

Callie laughed. "Well, you wanted cool water."

"Yes. But I didn't expect this."

He shook his head, spraying little droplets on her. Her skin was so flushed with desire that she wondered why the water didn't sizzle against it. He grinned.

"Now that I'm used to it, I like it so well, I think another bucketful is in order," he told her.

He rose to his feet, completely unaware of the picture he presented, with his skimpy shorts plastered to his lower body. Callie was mesmerized by the sight of him, and she turned away, trying to regain her composure. She squinted up at the sun as if she might find answers to troubling questions there. She listened to the pulley creak as he brought up another bucket.

"Hurry up," she ordered. "I want to wash my hands and legs."

"I'll help," he said abruptly.

"Matt, nooo!" Too late, she realized that he'd tricked her. The splashing sound of the water hid her more explicit words as the icy liquid hit her head and rolled down her body. She whirled around and hopped in place, shivering. Dripping wet, she looked up at him.

He nodded happily. "Callie, this is much better than my pool." Matt felt his smile fading as he noticed that her cotton bodice was now clinging to her chest, outlining her nipples perfectly.

Callie read the intensity in his eyes. Her hands dropped to her sides, and she stood still.

"Matt, no," she whispered.

"Yes," he answered in a voice so soft and low that she wasn't sure he'd spoken aloud.

They stood there, not touching, breathing softly, and she was aware only that they couldn't stop what was going to happen. She knew his thoughts as if he'd spoken them.

Matt hadn't intended to touch her. He hadn't known his hand was moving until he felt the contraction of her nipple beneath his fingertips.

"You're so very beautiful, Callie," he murmured, capturing her chin with his other hand. He held it as he bent down to kiss her. "And I want to kiss you. I have to kiss you," he begged, stopping her words of protest before they could be aired.

But she made no protest. Her arms snaked around his neck and held him tightly. She pressed her mouth and body against him in a wanton display of passion. She felt as if she were being torn apart, tortured by Matt's lips and hands until waves of feeling broke across her body as though she were a reef in a storm. He felt so good, so male, so much a part of her that it took a moment to realize that he soon would be, if she didn't pull herself away.

"No, Matt," she managed to say thickly. "I don't want to be one of the lady friends by your pool."

He drew back, his chest heaving. "Then let me be your gentleman friend by the well," he joked softly.

"No, Matt, no," she said flatly, pushing against his chest until he let her go. She looked away from him, then busied herself by picking up the bucket and replacing the well lid. "I don't want to get tangled up in the world you come from." She started toward the back door.

He walked beside her silently, then caught her wrist as she reached to grasp the door handle.

"Wait a minute, dammit," he said hoarsely, and pulled her against him. "I don't know what in hell made you hate men who have money, but I resent being unfairly judged by you or anyone."

"I'm not judging you, Matt. I'm judging me, and what I need from a relationship. You and I don't match."

"Callie," he said with a controlled fury that tinged every word, "why are you so afraid of me?"

"I'm not!"

"I can feel your heart beating in your fingertips. You're like some wild bird I've caught. Terrified."

"Go away, Matt Holland. Please," she whispered, "go away. I don't want you in my life."

"Too late. I'm already here." He didn't know who made the first move to close the distance between them, but suddenly the warmth of her breath feathered his lips. She kissed him tentatively, as if she hated herself for doing it. He groaned.

"I don't understand what's made you feel the way you do, Callie, but can't you just think of me simply as a man who needs you, who wants you? A man who thinks you're the most fascinating woman he's ever met?"

A moan of anguish slipped past Callie's lips. The last thing she wanted to happen was happening again. He was kissing her, and her traitorous body was responding as she wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned into the hardness he pressed against her.

"Mmmm." He felt so good. The strong arms around her, the hands massaging the small of her back, the lips searching her face and mouth, the tongue invading her without resistance. Her pulse set a crazy singing rhythm that seemed to merge into the corresponding heartbeat in his broad chest. Suddenly she felt his fingers on the bare skin of her bottom, fingers moving around the crease of her leg, allowing a flicker of cool air to touch the moist heat between her thighs.

"I'm going to carry you into your bedroom," Matt whispered against her ear. "I'm going to undress you. Then I'm—"

"Hello? Hellooo," a throaty male voice bellowed from the cabin's front yard. "Callie, are you heeeeere?"

Callie jerked herself away from Matt and groaned. She began trying to pull her wet clothing away from her body.

"Damn!" Matt stared at her in misery. She looked up, and appeared to be on the verge of tears. Matt smiled at her and stroked her cheek, ignoring his own torment. "First William, now John Henry," he muttered. "I'm going to have to steal both you and Ruby away from this place if I'm to have you to myself."

"That's not John Henry," Callie corrected, nodding toward the front yard. "It's Tyler."

"Tyler?" His voice showed his disbelief. "Your ex-husband Tyler? What is he doing here?"

"I told you he was a wonderful man," she managed to say, equally distressed. "He stops by occasionally just to visit. You stay here, and I'll try to ..."

Callie's voice died away as Tyler rounded the corner of the cabin and stopped abruptly.

"Callie, what the heck's going on up here?" he demanded. "John Henry's spouting something about your being better off than you ever have been before because you moved some 'silk-suited city man' into your smokehouse."

"Nice to see you, too, Tyler."

Callie watched Tyler's gaze move to Matt, and she saw Tyler's face darken as if a mountain thundercloud had crossed it. "And who are you?" Tyler asked.

"I'm the silk-suited city man," Matt answered dryly.

"Tyler Winter, meet Matt Holland. Matt Holland, my former husband, Tyler Winter."

There was a moment of silence when Matt could almost hear the cries of invisible Romans, yelling down at two modern-day gladiators ready to fight to the death.

Callie sighed. This would be interesting. In his younger days, Tyler had been very mellow and very secure, not the jealous type. In his new incarnation as a materialistic man, he had apparently developed a possessive attitude about her.

She moved toward him and smiled as she gestured back at Matt. "Mr. Holland is a friend of mine. We've been working in the garden." Callie decided to ignore the fact that the culottes clung to every crease of her body.

"Oh." Callie could tell from the strangled expression on Tyler's lean face that he was reminding himself that she and he had divorced by mutual agreement. They had a mature, nonjudgmental relationship.

Tyler was tall and lanky, with chocolate-brown hair. Callie noticed for the first time that his shoulders slumped under his pinstripe suit and that he had wisps of gray hair at his temples.

"Caroline," he said quietly. "I was up this way to close a deal today. I stopped to visit with John Henry, and he mentioned that you might sell Ruby. I came by to see why you need money so desperately."

She patted his arm. "Ty, I'm not going to sell her."

Matt stepped forward then. "I came here to buy the car," he told Tyler. "That's how Callie and I met. I'm a collector."

Tyler looked over Matt's faded shorts, his soggy T-shirt stained with dirt, and his grubby bare feet. Callie inhaled sharply as she saw the disapproval blaze up behind Tyler's calm exterior. Tyler hadn't always been so quick to catalog people, she remembered sadly.

"You look like you might do better to collect bars of soap," Tyler said, and smiled without warmth.

Matt turned to Callie, effectively snubbing Tyler, and asked, "What did you say he did for a living, dear?"

She stared up at Matt in amazement at the "dear," and suddenly she realized that Matt was the perfect match for Tyler. They were warring on polite, businesslike terms both of them understood exquisitely well, and they were both using her as ammunition. It was the kind of tactic her father had always used on people. She hated it.

"He's vice president of a real estate firm," Tyler interjected tartly. "And he can answer for himself, Mr. Holland."

Matt nodded to him. "Well, I'm president and principal stockholder of a paint company, Mr. Winter. Holland Paint. One of the biggest paint companies in the Southeast. So do me the favor of keeping your petty little comments about soap to yourself."

Callie felt like a pot of water about to boil. She looked from one man to the other.

"Who cares about your companies?" she asked in a low, fierce voice. "Who cares about your titles and your stupid, superficial pride? Neither of you owns me, and I won't be quarreled over. It's beneath my dignity."

"I apologize, Callie," Tyler said gruffly. "I'll be leaving. But before I go, I want to tell you that LeaAnn and I are engaged."

"I know about your engagement, Tyler. Several matrons from father's social circle wrote to me to make sure I knew. I think it's great. I'm happy for you."

Tyler gestured toward Matt. "You never had one of these before. A boyfriend." He appeared nearly to strangle on the next words. "How nice."

"Thank you," Matt said sweetly.

Callie gave Matt an incredulous look. He had the good grace to wince a little as her sharp gaze bored into him, silently warning him that he'd gone too far.

"I have an errand to run," she said abruptly, and stalked toward the barn.

"I'll go with you," Matt called. He started after her, but she whirled around and held out a hand to stop him.

"Don't you dare."

"Caroline," Tyler began. "Do you need money? Really, if—"

"No!" she yelled. "I don't need money! I need a mature man! If either of you sees one, send him by!"

She pushed the barn doors wide open, climbed into the Fiesta, and started the engine. As she roared out of the barn, her last sight of Matt shocked her. She'd have thought his worried eyes would be on the Fiesta. Instead, they were on her.

"The injunction has been granted! We've won! The city has agreed to halt demolition until a committee can study the building!"

Callie cheered along with a hundred other members of the historical society. The warm June air filled her with a sense of hope and happiness. She grinned at the man who'd just gotten out of a fat yellow taxi to make the victory announcement, and shook his hand. Lunchtime Atlanta traffic was so loud, it made discussing the victory a difficult task, so everyone simply applauded and waved picket signs at one another.

Callie set down her sign, which read, "Manuel Hall is a Hunk of History, Not a Hunk of Junk!" and wiped perspiration from her forehead as she studied the Gothic-style building on the narrow city lot. She squinted. Unfortunately, Manuel Hall was the ugliest old building she'd ever seen. It had a face only a mother historian could love.

Callie hoisted her sign to her shoulder and turned around. She felt the sign smack someone soundly.

"Oh, excuse me," she yelled amidst the din of Peachtree Street. Callie turned hurriedly to see who she'd clobbered and found Matt rubbing his arm and grinning.

"Even without William you're a menace," he said loudly.

Callie simply gaped up at him for a moment. It'd been two weeks since she'd left him and Tyler growling at each other. She'd gone to stay with neighbors and had instructed John Henry to fix Matt's car immediately. When she came back, Matt and the Corvette were gone.

Now she frowned. "If I'd known it was you, I'd have swung harder!"

He forced his handsome face into an expression of pained innocence. "It's nice to see you again too!" He took the sign in one hand and her elbow in the other. "Let's go have lunch!" he shouted.

"No!"

"I'll buy you some alfalfa sprouts, Callie!"

She was mesmerized by his warm brown eyes and the breathtaking way he had of being funny and sexy at the same time. She couldn't resist. A simple lunch couldn't be dangerous, could it?

"All right!" she yelled back. "But only one plateful!"

They walked out of the crowd of picketers to the edge of the sidewalk, and she almost giggled as she watched Matt start to wave for a taxi, then realize that he was wagging her "Hunk of Junk" sign at everyone driving south on Peachtree. Several motorists honked and grinned. Blushing, he handed the sign to her and stared fixedly out at traffic, his jaw set.

Today he wore a black suit with pinstripes. The suit had an elegant European cut, which emphasized the width of his shoulders and the tuck of his lean waist. A gold tie bar gleamed between the immaculate points of his white collar, and his silk tie was fixed

in a precise, tight knot. No sloppy attitudes for this man, Callie thought sardonically. She glanced down at her faded jeans and "USA for Africa" T-shirt. She liked sloppy.

She liked Matt's touch on her elbow, too. Her heart was pounding in her eardrums, and her skin felt one size too small. The feeling of immense attraction hadn't been a fluke. She felt it more than ever. Sighing, Callie admitted that she'd missed Matt terribly.

They settled in a taxi and rested her picket sign on the floor by their feet.

"How about Brother Juniper's for lunch?" Matt asked. The way he never took his gaze from her face made her wonder if he meant for her to be dessert.

She tilted her head to one side. "You do know that Brother Juniper's is a funky, health food restaurant?"

He nodded, and sighed dramatically. "I'll just have to suffer."

He told the cab driver to take them to Brother's. Then he settled back on the seat and smiled at her. Callie returned his steady, affectionate gaze with difficulty. Doubtlessly, the man intended to seduce her at the first opportunity. Her insides quivered.

"How did you know I'd be at Manuel Hall today?" she wanted to know.

"I heard about the protest on the radio. I said to myself, 'Where there's a protest, there's Callie Carmichael.' An educated guess."

"Hmmm." She studied him from under her eyelashes. "A man delivered a brand-new deluxe tractor to Tom Hicks's place last week. He said Tom had won first prize in the Tiny Toasties breakfast-cereal giveaway. Tom said he'd never heard of Tiny Toasties, but he'd keep the tractor anyway."

"Smart man," Matt noted, and nodded solemnly.

"You sent the tractor. Admit it!"

"Tractor?" He looked around the cab, as if searching for clues to what she meant. "Why, I don't know nothing 'bout tractors, Miss Caroline," he drawled.

"First John Henry, now my neighbor. You're trying to build alliances," she said accusingly. She didn't tell him that his kindness toward Tom had impressed her. Callie pointed to herself. "But I'm the only one who can sign a bill of sale for Ruby."

Matt smiled languidly, and stroked her bare arm with his fingertips. "Are you saying you want me to turn my efforts to you alone? I could enjoy giving you presents, charming you ..."

Callie drew her arm away from his disturbing touch, and chuckled. "You hopeless, materialistic, manipulative ..."

"Sexy, fun-loving ..." he supplied.

"Stubborn ..."

"Determined ..." he corrected, leaning forward.

"Outrageous ..." she said huffily. Callie fought for breath.

"Undoubtedly. Watch this." He leaned over further and pressed a firm kiss on her mouth.

Callie groaned against the hot, damp texture of his lips. The pressure of his mouth increased as he nudged her to kiss him back, and suddenly she did, tasting him, twisting her mouth gently against his.

"Jeez," the burly cab driver interjected. "Jeez."

They both ignored him. Matt pulled her into his arms, and she slid her fingertips into his golden hair. The kiss became a series of kisses. When it ended they looked at each other through half-closed eyes.

"You're glad to see me, I can tell," Matt whispered.

"It's pure animal attraction," she whispered back.

"Baaaa."

She laughed softly, and looked away. He released her, his hands trailing over her face and down her arms as he did.

"We're at Brother Juniper's, my little lovebirds," the driver grunted in a prim voice.

Callie straightened her clothes, deliberately looking downward in the process. She felt Matt studying her, his gaze as effective a caress as his touch had been.

"I'm glad you're not still angry with me," he told her. "I overreacted to Tyler, and I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "It's typical conservative male possessiveness. You and Tyler think of women in terms of ownership. I won't have it. That's the way my mother was treated."

"Your mother—" he began.

"Three fifty," the driver interrupted, looking back at them as he stamped the brake in front of an old building festooned with graffiti and colorful murals. "And please, a big tip."

Matt studied the look of relief that crept over Callie's face as paying the cab driver took his attention away from a discussion of her mysterious mother.

"This subject isn't closed," he told her firmly.

"Yes, it is," she answered in a polite tone. They got out of the cab and started toward Brother's.

No, it's not, Matt told her silently. Before I'm through with you, Ms. Carmichael. I'll have you, your car, and all your secrets too.

"You like him, don't you Callie, girl?"

Seated on the soft-drink case at John Henry's filling station, Callie took a sip of root beer, swung her legs a little, and watched John Henry fiddle under the hood of a tourist's car.

"I'm ... intrigued, I admit it. Matthew Holland is a unique man," she said finally. "Who else would drive all the way up here after work every day, just to see me and Ruby? He's been coming up here every day for three weeks!"

"He comes to see you, not the car," John Henry assured her.

"Oh, bull feathers. Me and the car," she insisted.

"He doesn't make love to the car."

Callie nearly dropped her soda bottle. "He doesn't make love to me, either, I want you to know!"

Orville, John Henry's assistant, looked up from his conversation at the pay phone over in one corner. His eyes were wide with curiosity. Callie blushed.

"There's been no cozy stuff," she told John Henry in a low, hissing voice. "He's trying

to get me to make the first move. He said so. He told me it was important to him that I ... that I decide when." She couldn't believe she was telling this to John Henry, her surrogate grandfather. But John Henry was no ordinary surrogate grandfather.

"Well ... when?" John Henry asked with great innocence.

She gasped. "What makes you think there'll be a 'when'?"

"You love him."

"I do not...."

"Bull feathers." John Henry discarded his old toothpick and immediately inserted a new one. He cocked one gray brow at her and shoved his tractor cap back on his head. "Do too," he said slowly. "Nothing wrong with falling in love so soon."

Callie stared at him, openmouthed. "And just what gives you this grand notion that I'm in love with Matt?"

"You been stayin' at home instead of runnin' off to every crazy protest in Atlanta. You been fixing your hair different ways. You make sure William's in the pen every afternoon before Matt gets there. I'd say that's love."

Callie sank back on the cooler and sighed. "He's the old and I'm the new. He's the past and I'm the present. We just don't fit."

"Are you sure? Give him a chance, Callie, and give yourself a chance too. Quit hiding behind your crafts and your charity work and your ideals. Live a little."

Callie thought for a moment, forcing herself to be as honest as she could. Finally she looked up at John Henry with a pained expression. "I've forgotten how to share my life with anybody else," she said softly. "I've forgotten how to love."

He nodded. "Well, then go and practice at it. No harm in practicing, is there?"

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Matt put the beef on the counter and sprinkled it with seasoning. The potatoes were already baking in the oven. He didn't know when Callie would be back or if she'd be back that day. She was simply gone, and John Henry didn't know where.

Matt went to the back door and leaned against it as he studied the mountains turning blue in the distance as the sun set. It was a potent, heart-catching sight. He felt lonely, surrounded by nature's beauty and yet isolated from Callie.

She'd known he'd be there that evening after work. She wanted him there, he knew that. So where was she? Matt dropped his chin to his chest and thought for a moment. Probably on some impulsive protest mission to save something or someone. He respected her idealism, loved it. But it overwhelmed him sometimes.

The kitchen was warm with the feel of her, and he smiled as he looked around. The bright yellow tablecloth was dotted with her red dishes. In the center was a clear jar filled with wild daisies he'd found growing along the roadside, and the purple flowers that hung from the well-house roof. He was placing the steaks on a broiler pan he'd found, when he heard the creak of the front steps.

"Hey, you!" he yelled. "I'll strip your hide off! Get away from the porch!"

At the sound of Matt's order Callie's lips began to crinkle. After coming to a

momentary stop she ran up the steps and through the cabin to the kitchen.

"Strip me, will you?" she said tartly, smiling at him.

"Oh." Her sudden appearance surprised him, and her inviting words were too much to comprehend. Matt's mind went blank for a second. "I thought you were William," he murmured.

The corners of her mouth drooped into a mock frown. "Oh, phooey. I was so looking forward to being stripped."

"You were?" She'd jolted his control again. As quickly as he'd seen her, all his careful dinner plans had evaporated, and he couldn't remember what he'd meant to do. He stood there staring at the mass of dark hair tangling wildly about her face and down her shoulders.

Her soft print dress came from a secondhand shop, he remembered her telling him once. It was a work dress, nothing fancy, loose and comfortable, with short sleeves. Her legs were bare, and plain leather sandals encased her feet. Her casual attire made Matt glad that he'd given up wearing nice clothes there. Now he enjoyed cut-offs and T-shirts, and went barefoot.

Callie gazed at his tall, enticing body with frank appreciation.

"Sorry to be late," she murmured.

"Where were you?" he asked bluntly, feeling hurt.

"Just taking care of necessities." She smiled in a mysterious way.

Matt felt himself harden as he looked at her beautiful face, her expression reflecting the same kind of need he was fighting so hopelessly to control. He thought he was misinterpreting her change of heart. He turned quickly toward the sink and rearranged the steaks in the broiler pan.

Callie felt a wave of disappointment sweep over her. He wasn't going to make it easy for her. She would be forced to pursue him, and she didn't know how.

"An encyclopedia salesman came by," he mentioned. "But he left quickly."

"Oh, no," she said. "You weren't rude, were you?"

"Not me," Matt protested innocently. "I wouldn't hurt a poor salesman. It was William who gave him the message."

"William? What did he do?"

"Well, William took it on himself to protect me. Would you believe that? That four-legged shaggy beast took off after this hapless guy and ran him up the apple tree."

"Where's William now?" Callie made a move toward the front porch.

"No, don't worry. He must still be out by the barn, stuffing himself."

"With what?"

"Ice cream."

"Where'd he get ice cream?"

"I brought it to him from the store. I owed him some kind of reward for attacking someone besides me. Don't you think?"

She walked out back, and Matt followed her, smiling. William was exactly where Matt had said he'd be, slurping the last of a rounded-out gallon of ice cream. His whiskers dripped with the melted pink liquid as he glanced up at Callie and burped noisily before

returning to his treat.

"Strawberry," Matt whispered in her ear. "And don't you dare tell him that ice cream is made from cow's milk. He thinks it's fruit juice."

Callie laughed. Matt put one arm around her shoulders, and she wound her arm around his waist. They ambled back inside in companionable silence. Callie glanced around, seeing for the first time the pan of steaks, the table already set for a meal, and the jar of wild flowers. "What are you doing, Matt?"

"Waiting for you to come home." He turned her to face him and folded his arms around her. She felt his lips touch a spot behind her left ear, and the strength drained out of her legs. His hair was faintly damp, and smelled of the apple-scented soap she kept in the bathroom.

"Did you just take a shower?" she asked curiously, lost in the taste and touch of him.

"Yes. Outside by the well. William even gave me permission to do that. He's decided I belong." He pulled her closer as he fit his hard masculine body snugly into the hollows of her female softness. "And I do belong, Callie. I belong right here, holding you, kissing you, loving you." They were silent for a second. Then he whispered, "So you're hoping to be stripped of your clothes, are you?"

"Yes," she whispered, "I'm ready."

"Oh, Callie," he murmured as he absorbed the full impact of her invitation, both with her body and her words. Her kiss seared him, and he sensed that their passion would bind them together in spirit as well as flesh.

He tore his mouth away from hers. "Are you sure, Callie? I want you. I've wanted you from that first moment. I've wanted to touch you, to make you burn with the fire you started in me."

"I'm sure, Matthew. I'm very sure." Her heart was racing wildly, and she thought her body must be screaming out loud with the desire she felt spinning through her. Her fingers were tugging at his shirt, and she felt his body shudder beneath her touch.

He caught her hands and pulled them away, breathing raggedly as he tried to slow the tide of desire that threatened to overwhelm them. "Wait, Caroline." His lips struggled with the words at the same time that his body was grinding itself against her. "We've got to talk about this."

"Talk? After all these weeks, you want to talk, now?" Callie felt reality swim through her thoughts, momentarily stilling the passion that had racked her.

"No, it's just that we have to be sure. I mean, Callie, are you certain that you want us to make love?" He'd been stunned by her boldness. He'd planned to woo her very carefully. Now she was unbuttoning that old dress and pulling it down her golden shoulders. He'd have to speak quickly or he wouldn't be able to. "I mean, well, are you ... Hell, this is very hard."

"That's nice. If my biology serves me right, that's just how you're supposed to be." She chuckled, uncertain about how to handle the next few moments. She slid her arms out of her dress, revealing the thin cotton camisole that she substituted for a bra when the weather was hot.

Once again Matt thought, she had made him fumble for words and lose his polished

control. He felt like a schoolboy, uncertain of what he was expected to do next. She slid the dress down her thighs, and he stared at her white panties.

"Undress me, Matthew," she urged tenderly.

His reservations took flight at the sight of the glowing welcome in her eyes. He took her hands as she stepped out of the dress and pushed it away with the toe of one sandal. She kicked the sandals off. Her legs were long and sun-kissed, with only a faint indentation of paler skin along the lower edge of her panties.

Matt let go of her hands and ran his fingers across her thighs. She moaned as he eased her panties down. The soft brush of hair at the V of her legs was lush and full. He touched it reverently, and she quivered. Then he slid his hands up her stomach and cradled her breasts under the camisole. A second later, the camisole lay on the floor.

"Well, Matthew?" What was meant as a teasing challenge came out as a husky whisper. "Are we going to give this mismatched pairing a try?"

"Oh, Caroline." He swept her off her feet and carried her the few steps into the bedroom. He settled her on the bed and lowered himself over her, sucking in his breath as she began touching him.

"Lovely, so lovely," he murmured as he caressed her breasts. His fingertips skimmed every inch of their surface before his lips captured one dusky nipple. He delivered a loving examination of every inch of her, delighting her until she thought she would explode with need.

She wanted to touch him, to return the pleasure, but she couldn't do more than cling to his shoulders, his head, his neck as he kissed her. His hands moved languidly, sliding between her thighs. She opened herself to him willingly, arching against his exploration. She closed her eyes as his lips moved to where his hands had been. She felt a great ripple begin to build, a ripple that threatened to explode inside her.

She tried to squirm out of his reach, to hold back, to stop the release of ... Then it was too late, and she heard a cry of pleasure that rang through the room. Callie realized dimly that it came from her.

"Oh, Matt." She bit her lip as he raised dark eyes to look at her. "I've never made love that way before."

"Neither have I," he confessed. The wonder in his voice fell across her like a gentle ray of heat. "Callie, do you know what miraculous changes you've wrought in me?"

"No," she said breathlessly.

"Neither do I, but don't ever stop."

They laughed softly. "I'd like to do more," she whispered. "But you're wearing too many clothes."

He stood up and began to strip, his eyes never leaving her face. When he was naked he waited silently for a moment, for her reaction. Her sharp intake of breath spoke more loudly than words.

"Oh, Matt, you're ... you're a collector's item yourself."

He grinned, and lay down beside her. "No, what I am is so deeply in love with you that all you need to do is touch me and I'll ... Callie, don't do that, or I won't be able to hold back. You might get ... We can't ..."

"Oh, you're so sweet. So thoughtful. But we can, Matt. I took care of that this afternoon."

Matt's breathing was harsh and loud as Callie pulled him over her, guiding him to the spot already aching to be filled. He stopped for a moment and looked at her before beginning to press slowly down, pushing himself inside her. Then he began to move slowly, holding back as though he were afraid she would break.

Callie wrapped her legs around his body and pulled him closer, arching herself against him. "Callie," she heard him whisper, and she lost all pretense of restraint. What she'd felt before paled in comparison to the flood of feelings he had begun in her body.

"Oh, Callie, I'm trying to hold back, but I can't," he said thickly. "Hurry, my love, come with me. Hurry. Please, my darling Callie."

His motions and the deep need in his voice fueled the storm swirling inside her until she knew she'd have no trouble giving what he asked for. The release that followed seemed to catch her in the shudder of his body as he joined with her in a final shattering earthquake of passion.

When she finally floated back to reality she felt him lying on top of her, still joined, carefully rubbing her breast with one hand as though it were the most precious object in the world. There was a completeness about the feel of him against her, and Callie wondered how she'd spent so many years not knowing that such a sweet unity of emotion and sensation was possible.

Matt raised himself on one elbow. "Am I too heavy?" He started to move away.

"No!" Callie clasped her legs around him, holding him tightly against her. "Don't move. I don't ever want this to stop."

"Was it good, Callie? I mean, did you feel what I did?"

"Isn't that what men always ask?" she asked teasingly, then hastened to reassure him when she saw the flicker of concern in his eyes. "Oh, Matt, it's never been like that for me. I never knew anything could be so beautiful." Her voice dropped as she tried to explain. "Tyler and I ... We had good intentions, but ..."

"Didn't you have anyone to compare Tyler to? A beautiful woman like you?"

He kissed her breasts gently, running his tongue around her nipples in a way that set off little sparks of fire beneath her skin.

"No, Matthew, there was only Tyler." She struggled for words. "I know you're experienced in making love, but Tyler and I never really got the knack of it. Even after six years ... we just weren't compatible that way. We were terrific in other ways, but in bed ... Maybe it was my fault ..." She stopped, embarrassed.

Matt looked down at her, affection gleaming in his eyes. "I've had experience, Callie, maybe a great deal of it, by your standards." He paused, hunting for honest words that weren't too crude. "Callie, a man almost always reaches a climax, but only occasionally, with someone very special, does he combine that physical release with something spiritual." He touched her face lovingly. "I swear to you, it's never been wonderful like this for me before."

He lowered his head to capture her mouth, and within seconds she felt him stir inside her again. His tongue examined and probed and demanded the same in return.

She could taste the flavor of passion on him, and it made her writhe. This time their movements were slow and gentle as the need built to a gentler kind of loving release. Even then Callie couldn't keep back the ecstasy, and Matt gloried in the cry she made as he filled her with his pleasure.

Later she lay in the circle of his arms, his leg across her lower body as though he were afraid she might escape. Neither of them spoke, but the silence was sweet and full of emotion. Callie needed a moment to sort out the new feelings she was experiencing. Every part of her felt sated and tender, and light enough to fly. She smiled at the thought that the anchor of Matt's leg was all that kept her from floating blissfully out the window into the magenta evening sky.

"Callie?" Matt's voice was tentative. "Callie, I can't excuse the fact that I was careless today. I can't believe that I didn't stop to question you more. I've never taken a woman to bed without doing the proper planning."

"Poor, overorganized Matt." He was really in distress. She stroked his arm gently. "I believe you're the most responsible man I know. There's not an irresponsible bone in your body. Relax, dear one."

He nuzzled her cheek in response to the sweet words, but he still sounded upset. "I should have been prepared. What I'm trying to say is that I didn't take any precautions. I didn't take care of you, Callie. I might have made you pregnant."

Callie reached down and caressed his satiated male part, and enjoyed feeling him stiffen at even her faintest touch. "Would that be so bad?"

He was silent for a moment, and she held her breath. "No," he whispered. "It really wouldn't."

Callie kissed him deeply. "I couldn't be irresponsible about that, Matt. But thanks for being wonderful." He smiled at her tenderly, and she stroked his jaw. "I took care of everything. I stopped while I was out this afternoon and had myself fitted for a diaphragm."

He breathed a sigh of relief, then thought for a minute. "But you didn't put it in."

"The doctor did, Matt. And I never took it out."

"You'd already made up your mind to let me make love to you?"

"No, what I had in mind was my making love to you."

"What would you have done if I hadn't driven up here today? Would you have come to Atlanta?"

"I don't think so. Why? Do you intend to stay in Atlanta from now on?" She squinted at him shrewdly. "I'm still not going to sell you Ruby."

He tapped her rear lightly, in rebuke. "I don't care whether you do or not. You're so suspicious."

"I know. Forgive me."

"So you won't come to Atlanta to make love to me," he noted quietly.

"No. But I'll be here whenever you have time for me, Matt."

He looked at her solemnly. "I'll make time. Lots of time."

There was an intimacy to their conversation. He was holding her, running his hands over her body in a soft, reassuring caress. Callie couldn't seem to stop her fingers from

stroking, teasing, touching as she rubbed him, then rubbed herself with the part of his body she was slowly bringing back to life.

"Didn't anybody ever tell you that when a man reaches thirty-five he's past the peak of his sexual ability?" Matt asked gruffly. "I mean, two times in less than thirty minutes is a commendable showing. Three times in less than thirty minutes is purely showing off."

"Doesn't bother William," Callie answered saucily, "and he's the equivalent of forty years old in human terms, if my figures are correct. Tom Hicks's lady goat got out last week, and William was extremely ... attentive. I told Tom that William would do the honorable thing and marry her, but Tom said he likes baby goats, so I needn't feel bad."

Matt chuckled. "I refuse to be compared to William on this score," he informed her. "You greedy woman." Matt rolled over on his back and pulled her on top of him. "I'll do the honorable thing by you," he said solemnly.

She nodded and leaned over, teasing him by brushing the mat of his chest hair with her nipples. "And I suppose what I feel beneath me is you, showing off?"

It was and he did. It was much later before Matt remembered the potatoes he'd put into the oven to bake. It was even later when he threw them to William, who had waited patiently outside the kitchen door for hours.

"Sorry, William," Matt told him. "We didn't mean to forget about you. We've been preoccupied."

Matt could have sworn that the goat had a grin of approval on his whiskered face.

"Caroline, did you know that you make little mewing sounds while you're sleeping? I've been lying here listening to you and watching your eyelashes flutter."

She'd known he was awake, watching her. She'd been awake herself for several minutes, enjoying the knowledge that he was studying her. She'd felt him pull the sheet down very, very slowly, so that one of her nipples was exposed. Callie stretched, sensually aware that the movement completed the unveiling he'd waited for.

"Are you going to show off again, Matthew? I'd have thought you'd still be sleeping, after last night." Laughing, she curled away from him as he tickled her. Her breasts tingled madly under his admiring gaze.

"It's that apple juice you fed me yesterday," he assured her. "It gives me energy. William tipped me off to its potent powers."

"Oh? I never knew William had a secret source of virility."

"Why else do you think he let me get the encyclopedia salesman out of the apple tree? He wasn't taking any chances with his aphrodisiacs."

They both chuckled. Callie looked up into Matt's dark brown eyes and read the love she saw there. Had she encouraged heartache by taking this man into her life? With a sigh of contentment Callie pushed the doubt from her mind.

"What's wrong, Caroline Melissa Carmichael? I saw that frown."

"Nothing," she told him quickly. "Caroline Melissa, that's what my mother called me. I like it. How'd you find out my full name?"

"I peeked at the family Bible on the shelf by the fireplace one day. Caroline Melissa was your grandmother McKinnon's name as well, I noticed."

"Grandmother Caroline made this." Callie touched the blanket that barely covered his muscled thighs. She pointed to a frail-looking piece of crocheting encased in a frame on the wall. "Great-grandmother Caroline made that. Actually, I'm the fourth Caroline in the family. It's an old, well-loved name."

"An enchanting name." He sighed. "Ah, the past is where a man can find treasures worth keeping. You love the past as much as I do, Caroline Melissa. We're very much alike."

"And am I a treasure worth keeping?"

"Definitely worth keeping," he promised softly as he kissed her just above her left eyebrow. "I've dreamed about you for weeks. I'd wake up and think I was making love to you."

"Ah, flattery. We mountain women love it."

"Do you love me?" he asked.

Callie moved so she could look into his eyes. "Perhaps I do. I don't know if I can say the words yet...."

"Ssssh. Wait until the time is right, then." He nodded, his eyes shining. "It goes

without saying that I love you.”

She moved slightly, inching closer, and continued to study him.

His throat ached, and he couldn’t speak, couldn’t tell her how profoundly she had changed his life. Her nose was patterned with light freckles, and Matt touched them with his fingertip, while his lips skimmed down her face and sampled her waiting mouth. Her lips were soft and giving, and when his fingers slid between her legs he felt her grow warm and moist.

“My dreams were just a poor imitation of the real thing, Caroline. As an expert on collectibles, I should have known that the original would be infinitely more pleasing than my imagination’s copy.”

She laughed at his whimsical words. “Maybe you’re not the expert you claim to be, Matthew.”

“Maybe.” He released the nipples he was rubbing between his fingertips, and slid over her. He warned ominously, “Maybe you’d better hold me tight. I think I need more research.”

Matt knew now what his conservative life had been missing. The woman beneath him was giving, giving without reserve, the same way she lived her life. She loved him with a naturalness that went beyond simple passion and desire. This was more real than anything he’d ever known, and he never wanted to move away from her.

Blending into each other so completely that they couldn’t tell where he ended and she began, they loved each other until the sun poured brightly through a window and warmed their tired bodies.

William, stomping persistently on the back step, finally brought Callie out to the kitchen. Matt trailed behind her, running his hands through his rumpled hair.

“He’s waiting for his coffee and toast,” Callie explained as she filled a percolator with water. “You make the toast while I take a shower. Then it’s your turn. Now that we’re on such intimate terms, you can use the indoor shower.”

“Real plumbing! Hot water!”

“Old plumbing,” she corrected. “Lukewarm water.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” he said abruptly, and took her hand. “Stay here.”

She laughed. “I’m just going to the shower, Matthew. It’s only thirty feet away.”

“Too far,” he protested. But Matt let go of her hand and smiled to hide his deeper emotions. He didn’t want to scare her with demonstrations of the tender possessiveness he felt. So he resorted to the easy, flippant banter she enjoyed. “I’d like to take a shower with you.” He paused. “Just for research purposes, of course.”

“Any more research, Holland, and I won’t get my baskets to Helen this weekend.”

“Helen? We don’t need to see anybody else right now. Let her wait until next weekend.”

She smiled. “The town of Helen. Good grief, I thought you said you moved here from Maryland fifteen years ago. Haven’t you ever heard of Helen?”

He looked defensive. “I used to be a workaholic. I didn’t get out of Atlanta much.”

Callie kissed his cheek in sympathy. “When did you change your bad ways?”

His eyes were somber. "When I met you."

She was speechless for a moment, shocked by the sincerity of his words. Then she cleared her throat and said, "Well, Helen is a tourist town, and it's sponsoring a craft show in two weeks. I'm going to take a load of baskets and wreaths up for the shops to sell. I go several times a year."

"Fine," He looked cheerful again as he turned to the refrigerator to remove a plate of creamy butter. "I've never been to Helen. It ought to be fun."

"Matt, don't you have a business to get back to?"

"It's Friday, and I'm taking the day off. For this weekend, Caroline, you're my only business." He drew his finger across the butter, then slipped his finger into her mouth. After a startled second in which her stomach seemed to drop to her toes, she licked the butter away and sucked gently on the end of his finger. He watched every move she made, his eyes half shut. Then he whispered, "My business and my pleasure. My very great pleasure."

He slid his finger across her lips and smiled. Callie felt her knees wobble. "In that case," she teased weakly, "let's not forget to take the apple juice with us."

"Callie, of course we'll use my van," Matt argued, pointing toward the sleek red vehicle he'd driven up in from Atlanta the day before. "You can't possibly carry this load of vines in the Fiesta. They'll blow away, or come unfastened halfway there. Besides," he added in genuine horror, "suppose something happened to the Fiesta. You never know what can happen around a bunch of tourists."

"Matt, I have hauled these vines, as you call them, before. I put half of them in the trunk and the other half on the back seat and cover them with a quilt."

"No, no. You could make some real money at this enterprise if you'd be more efficient. Use the van and you can take more to sell, and get the merchandise there in better condition, I'd bet. Not all mashed and rumpled, the way everything must be when it comes out of the trunk or the back seat."

"I don't sell 'merchandise,' I sell craftwork," she said with a twinge of annoyance. "And I like to drive the convertible because I like to feel the wind on my face. I don't care if it's an inefficient way to travel."

Unaware of her changing mood, Matt rubbed his chin and looked at the sky, lost in speculation. "You know," he said, "I think you need a second vehicle for your work. A good van or a truck, maybe even a station wagon. Then we could put the Fiesta up on blocks."

"Why?" she asked in amazement.

"So it wouldn't get damaged. You really shouldn't be driving such a valuable antique, anyway. It's as if—" he spread his hands in a gesture of supplication, "as if you were using a Ming vase to pot geraniums. Sacrilege."

Callie put her hands on her hips. When she spoke, her voice was full of warning. "Did you go to bed with me just so you could rearrange my life? Did I give you permission? I always drive the Fiesta to Helen. I drive the Fiesta everywhere."

Stunned, he looked at her silently. Then a sheepish expression touched his face.

"But, Caroline"—he looped his arms around her waist, pulling her and an armful of wreaths closer—"you don't usually have me along to take up space and occupy your mind. Please," he said coaxingly, "let's use the van. No point in letting the thing just sit here. Besides," he added with a wicked gleam in his eyes, "it's almost like having your own private house along the road—very private."

"Matthew, you scoundrel." Callie felt all her annoyance evaporate at his touch. His body communicated in a way that transcended petty issues, and she felt herself surrendering to his plan. "Okay, Holland. In the spirit of my personal philosophy—which is to try new ways of doing things as often as possible—you're on." He smiled, and she smiled back. "I had a van before I came to Sweet Valley and Gramps gave me Ruby," she noted.

"I didn't mean to be pushy," he told her. He shook his head, touched his lips briefly to hers, and added, "When I get carried away, just kick me in the shins and remind me that you're a free spirit."

"It's a deal." Though she continued to smile at him, Callie felt a knot of worry begin to build under her rib cage. Would Matt keep trying to organize her life in ways he thought were better than hers? Was she in for trouble from this wealthy, superorganized businessman?

"What happened to your van?" he asked.

She slid out of his embrace and started picking up baskets. "John Henry reconditioned it, and I sold it to Lacey. She needed it to haul her clowns. Before she got the van, she used to pack the poor devils into her Toyota, ten or twelve at a time."

"What are they, midgets?" Matt asked, puzzled. "That sounds pretty damned uncomfortable, if you ask me. Was she their manager or something?"

Callie burst into laughter. "She makes them, silly. They're cotton and silk and satin. Lacey follows the craft-show circuit. She's probably on her way back from Florida about now."

"Whew. Can't imagine why anyone would want that kind of vagabond life. Sounds exhausting."

Matt's words kept running through Callie's mind as they loaded the van. There'd been a time when she'd led the same kind of vagabond life, before she came to the valley. First with Tyler, and then, after the divorce, on the craft-show circuit.

Keeping on the move had seemed the best way to close out the past. Now the past didn't seem so important, because Matt filled the present with so much happiness.

They piled the center section of the van with baskets and wreaths, and both of them avoided mentioning the fact that they were keeping the back section—the section with the TV and the plush couch—empty. After they finished loading her crafts, Matt threw a small canvas sports bag under the van's cocktail table. Callie placed her own small bag beside it.

She suddenly felt a strange awkwardness about going. Making love with Matt at the cabin seemed warm, natural, harmless. But this trip to Helen had become an intimate weekend venture that seemed full of dangerous commitments. And other problems. How would Matt react to the cheap little inn where she usually stayed on these jaunts?

"Well stop by the garage and tell John Henry where we're going," Matt said as he opened the passenger door and motioned for Callie to get in.

"We will?" Callie's concern over John Henry's reaction was mirrored in the panic on her face, and found an outlet in her next statement. "I'll drive, Matt. This is my trip, and I'm more familiar with the route."

"No way. This is my van, Caroline, and I'm a disgustingly macho man when it comes to driving. I've studied the map, and I won't get lost. I know where I'm going. I always do. I'm organized, remember? Get in!"

"Do you have a map? Have you got enough gas? Tires okay? It's a long, rough drive." She walked around the van, scrutinizing it. Then she felt Matt's hand on her arm. He tugged her to the passenger door. Callie glanced at his face and saw it was set in hard lines.

"Yes. Yes. And yes. Quit treating me like a dumb city bumpkin," he ordered. He opened the door and jerked his head brusquely. "Get your fanny in."

She'd nettled him, and it gave her a grim sense of victory. She didn't really want to drive the van, but she needed to let him know that he wasn't in charge, no matter what he thought. Callie smothered a sharp retort and stepped up into the plush velvet interior. She wouldn't argue.

It was Matt's van, after all. And it wasn't his driving that was worrying her, it was their new status as a couple. She began to feel claustrophobic.

From the time Matt threw William an extra ration of hay and closed the gate behind them, until they reached John Henry's garage in dusty, tiny Sweet Valley, Callie quietly attempted to assess her unsettled emotions.

"Morning, folks," John Henry said wryly. He shifted a match stem from one side of his mouth to the other, and Callie noticed that it didn't move a bit after that. John Henry couldn't hide his intense curiosity as long as that matchstick acted as a barometer, she thought with grim amusement.

"Stopped by last night, but nobody came to the door," he told them. "Figured you folks must have been busy, or something."

Callie felt her face flame, and she looked into the back of the van, pretending to check the baskets packed behind her seat. Busy? Heavens, they'd probably been napping in each other's arms when John Henry came by. She wanted to hide under the seat. She felt as if her grandfather were standing right beside John Henry, peering at her with a knowing expression.

Matt climbed down from the van and slapped John Henry's back jovially. Callie had to admire him; he was completely composed. "Sorry we missed you, John Henry. We owe you a dinner."

"We" owed him a dinner. Callie repeated those words in her mind. Matt was closing in, telling the world that they were together for good now. He wanted John Henry to know, that was obvious.

"Where y'all headed?" John Henry asked politely.

Matt answered before Callie had a chance. "We're delivering a load of Callie's wares to Helen for a festival that's coming up."

"John Henry." Unwilling to let Matt do all the talking for the two of them, Callie searched for something to say to reclaim her identity. "If Lacey comes by here looking for me, tell her to let herself in the cabin. She knows where the key is. She might not show up, but then again, she might. It's about time for her to be working the fairs around here."

"Fine. I'll tell her. I've been meaning to talk to her about a few things anyway," he said absently as he studied Callie's face.

"Now, John Henry, you keep your interfering hands off Lacey's life," Callie ordered with a firm nod. "She isn't at all interested in your theories about matchmaking and men."

John Henry winked at her. "You and Matt gonna take in the sights of Helen, are you?"

"We're planning on it," Matt answered first. Callie sighed in defeat. He gave Callie an "okay, you win" look, got a gauge, and began checking the van's tires. "Well be back Sunday," he called to John Henry.

"Sunday, huh?" John Henry said. He leaned his head into the van. "You take care, now, Callie," he whispered. "I know what I said earlier about your needing a fellow. I wouldn't want it to get out, but I've been known to be wrong about things once or twice. You be sure you know what you're doing."

There was definitely a worried frown on John Henry's forehead. Callie leaned forward and planted a kiss in the middle of it. "Everything's all right, you old dear, and I'm trying to learn to love somebody. Don't worry about me," she whispered. "I'll be careful."

"You feel all right? You look a little flushed."

"This is different for me," she whispered. "Letting myself depend on somebody. I feel ... cautious."

"Funny, that's what Doc Campbell said about you when I asked him what you were doing in his office in the middle of the afternoon yesterday. All he'd tell me"—his voice was low in her ear—"was that you were a great believer in being cautious."

John Henry looked at her closely, and then, when she thought her face couldn't burn any hotter than it already had, he winked at her, pulled his head out of the window, grinned, and added, "Have fun. You deserve it."

"What was all that whispering about?" Matt asked as he guided the van onto the steep two-lane road heading north.

"Just words to the wise from an old sage. You know John Henry. A busybody's always got to have the last word. I hope Lacey doesn't come here while I'm gone. John Henry has that look in his eye again. He'll be sending men up to court her."

The van moved smoothly along the highway, and soon they were climbing deeper into the Blue Ridge Mountains. Helen was a hundred miles northeast of Sweet Apple, and Callie normally would have made the trip in under two hours. But Matt seemed in no hurry. His steady pace and the comfortable silence that filled the van gave Callie time to think, yet it wasn't easy to concentrate.

She stole a glance at Matt, and found there was a broad grin on his face.

"You know," he said suddenly, "I'm thirty-five years old, and this is the first time in my life I've ever played hooky from work."

"Hooky? Surely you don't work seven days a week, do you?"

"Saturday, Sunday, and straight through the week. For as long as I can remember, since high school."

"Why on earth did you work that hard while you were in school? Especially since you come from a wealthy family."

He drove for a second without answering. Finally, his voice low, he said simply, "I told you a lie about my father's leaving me a lot of money, Caroline."

Callie looked at him with a puzzled frown. "Why, Matthew?"

"I don't like melodrama any more than you do. The story sounds like something out of a soap opera, and I figured you wouldn't believe me. So I just let you think my father gave me a bundle."

"Tell me the truth," she said softly.

"My father died when I was fifteen. Shortly after he died I learned that everything was gone. His partners in the paint company had taken it all."

Callie heard the bitterness in his voice. "I'm sorry, Matthew." She reached out and touched his bare arm in concern. "Go on."

"His beloved company, which he'd spent every day of his life building up to the point where it was ready to pay for itself, was nearly bankrupt. It killed him. He really died of grief."

"You said his partners took everything. How?"

"They outvoted him, and he was forced to sell the plant to a big conglomerate. Afterward he found out the conglomerate intended to use the plant as a tax write-off. They eased out most of the workers, let the business go to hell, then closed it down."

"And your dad got sick pretty soon after that?"

Matt hesitated for a moment, slowed the van, and looked at her. "He killed himself with an overdose of sleeping pills."

"Oh, Matt." She hurt as if she shared Matt's soul. Callie closed her eyes. I do share his soul, she thought. And she understood his painful memories all too well, because they were an echo of her own.

"And your mother, Matthew?"

"My mother?" He shook his head. "She died a year later. Might as well call that suicide too. She killed herself grieving for father."

"Oh, Matthew. How did you manage?"

His knuckles were white as he gripped the steering wheel. Finally he answered in slow, simple words that measured how hard this was for him. "I lived with a foster family, and I did the only thing I knew how to do. I worked. I worked my way through high school, college, and graduate school. I worked nonstop until I'd managed to get back everything my father lost, and then some."

He sounded apologetic. "If power and wealth and rigid organization are important to me, Callie, it's because of the past."

"Matt," she whispered unevenly, "do you think you could pull off the road, into that

clump of trees up ahead?"

"My Lord, Caroline, you're white as a sheet."

Sudden concern for her erased the pain on Matt's face as he maneuvered the van off the interstate and down the bumpy, overgrown road into a thicket of pine trees. He hurried around to the side of the van, opened the door, placed his hands around her waist, and started to lift her out.

"You need some fresh air," he told her.

"No. I need you." She kissed him tenderly and tried to smile. "I just need to hold you."

He guided her into the back of the van, and they lay down on the soft couch. She began to cry gently.

"I hurt for you," she told him as he crooned soft words against her ear and held her. "I hurt for you so much."

She opened her body and her heart to him, and he accepted both with the hunger of a starving man.

• • •

Matt was right. The van was much more efficient than the convertible, and wonderfully private as well. It was nearly an hour before they started up the road again.

The sky was a fresh, cloud-smeared blue. The crisp mountain air caught Callie's hair and shaped it into a dark mist around her face. She felt peaceful. She could tell from Matt's smile and his frequent glances at her that he'd found peace too.

They passed through several truck stops before Callie's stomach finally sent out a protest that Matt couldn't ignore. He glanced over at her again, his smile still going full force.

"Why do you keep doing that?" she asked.

"What?"

"Looking at me and smiling."

"I just can't keep my eyes off you. I've never known anybody who created such joy by simply being herself. I want to sit and stare at you. I want to yell to the world. I am going to yell to the world." He stuck his head out the window and roared at a startled man driving an open-cab Jeep, "This is Ms. Caroline Carmichael, who craves my body and makes my soul delirious!"

The Jeep driver shook his head and returned Matt's grin with one of his own, and a thumbs-up sign of approval.

Callie chuckled softly. "It's hard to believe that this is the same man who stood on my porch a few weeks ago. You need a haircut and a shave. You must be intoxicated by mountain air."

"And you," Matt retorted seriously, "haven't once mentioned a new cause. I think you've run out of things to save, preserve, picket, or protest."

"But Matt, I haven't had to look for a cause since I've had you. There's an old saying —'Don't wish for water when you're drowning in it.' "

There was a sudden cold silence in the van. Matt's fingertips drummed on the steering wheel. "You mean that's what I am to you, just a new cause, a new project of sorts?"

"Of course not," she amended hastily. "That wasn't what I meant. But"—she tried to think out her answer, her honest answer—"I suppose it is. Being with you has been a beautiful, wonderful experience that is new for me. Is that so wrong?"

He didn't know how to answer. Was he going to say that he wanted to be more than a wonderful new experience? He drew a deep breath. It was time to slow down and consider the options, to quit pretending that he was simply playing hooky. Where was this weekend jaunt going to get him?

"Matt? Matt!"

"What?" He jerked himself back to the present.

"I hate to have to tell a master of planning and organization that he just missed the exit, but unless we're going to start a Tennessee adventure, you'd better turn around and go back."

Matt glanced in the rearview mirror and saw that not only had he driven past the exit he was to have taken, but the speedometer was recording a number much higher than he'd thought. Which wasn't to say he didn't like to drive fast—he'd been known to put the Corvette into superdrive when he was alone on a long stretch of road—but never when he had a passenger in the car.

He looked over at Callie's teasing expression and choked back what he'd been about to say. Her eyes, wide with mirth, clearly indicated she was waiting for an explanation.

"Guess it's a side effect of some kind, Caroline Carmichael. You've got me going in circles."

"Good. You need to loosen up. Even John Henry thinks you'll 'come around.' "

"Oh, no"—he chortled—"you won't get me on that one. Talking with you is like dealing with William. I never know what you've got on your mind."

"Good. Does that mean I'll get some strawberry ice cream too?"

"You prefer that to apples?"

"Well, let's just say I'm hungry, Matt Holland, and I've never been known to have a small appetite for anything I like."

Matt took the next exit, and threaded his way off the two-lane road and back onto the expressway headed in the opposite direction. He couldn't concentrate on his driving and Callie and his feelings all at once. He'd always been accused of having tunnel vision. He was accustomed to directing his attention to one thing at a time, and Callie seemed to come at him from all directions, shattering any attempt at concentration.

For this weekend, he'd simply forget about everything but Callie and the growing need he had to draw her back to Atlanta with him.

"Strawberry ice cream for the lady, and a slab of apple pie for me," Matt told the waitress at the first truck stop he'd found that announced homemade desserts.

"An extra-large slice of apple pie," Callie directed with a firm nod.

The waitress brought their food quickly.

"What exactly did John Henry whisper in your ear when we were leaving?" Matt asked casually as he dug into his pie.

"I don't think I'm going to tell you, Matt. Let's just say he's getting cold feet, now that he thinks his little plan to find me a man is working out."

"You think he doesn't approve of me?" Matt hadn't considered this possibility before.

"It isn't that, exactly. He's concerned that maybe we haven't found a common meeting ground yet." Callie licked a frosting of pink from her upper lip and swallowed. Suddenly she couldn't look at Matt. The conversation was becoming serious, and she didn't want that. She didn't want to think about where their relationship was heading.

"Funny." Matt reached out and caught a spot of ice cream she'd missed at the corner of her lip. His finger traced the lower edge and dropped to catch her chin and lift it, forcing her to meet his gaze. "I'd say we've found one very important common meeting ground."

His lips, still sticky with apple, touched hers, and they blended into a sweetness she never wanted to end.

"Excuse me," the waitress said. "Will you be wanting anything more?"

Matt pulled himself away and answered the waitress without taking his eyes from Callie's face. He winked. "Indeed we do, a lot more." He looked at the waitress and winked again. "But we'll have to go elsewhere or you'll think we're exhibitionists."

Callie hid a smile. The waitress giggled in delight. Matt put a handful of bills on the counter and tugged Callie out of the restaurant. Callie blushed when she saw the open grins of the patrons watching the two of them walk arm in arm out the door.

"You know that waitress is in love with you now," Callie said as he opened the passenger door for her.

"I'm already taken."

"You're a bad influence on womanhood, Matthew."

He chuckled, then pulled her into his arms. "Must be the apples. Remind me to see if there's such a thing as apple ice cream. William would love it."

She kissed him fervently, and they rocked back and forth, smiling and kissing again. When he finally released her she heard scattered applause from the doorway of the truck stop.

This time it was Callie who gave the world a sample of her joy, by throwing the group imaginary kisses and a smile of pure happiness.

Seven

"Callie, you mean you don't even want a receipt for the merchandise—the craftwork, I mean—that you're leaving to be sold?" Matt's incredulous voice carried through the shop, and Callie winced as the owner, Perry Lawrence, looked up questioningly.

"Don't worry, Perry," she called. "I'm with my new, self-appointed business manager who doesn't understand our arrangement. Cool it, businessman," she admonished Matt under her breath.

Matt looked from Callie to the armful of kudzu baskets he was carrying, and shook his head. For the last hour he'd played stock clerk as he unloaded baskets and wreaths and followed Callie into one shop after another. He'd been amazed to learn that Callie worked without formal merchandise orders from the shopkeepers.

They apparently never knew, and didn't care, when she'd appear with goods. They were always happy to see her. As she accepted one check after another for past sales, Matt realized that her work sold extremely well.

Surveying the items still piled in the van, he came to the conclusion that they had at least one more stop to make.

"Let's hurry," he ordered as she stacked baskets and counted wreaths. She shot him a disgruntled look.

"I wish William were here. I'd sic him on you. Teach you some manners, Mr. Holland. And some patience."

"Sorry." He grinned an apology and started helping her organize her last delivery.

Matt knew he was acting bossy, but he hoped she understood why he had so little patience. She shouldn't need a crystal ball to figure out that he wanted to be alone with her, as they'd been in the cabin.

"Look, Matt, one of Lacey's clowns."

They were at the last shop. Matt had unloaded the final set of wreaths and baskets, and they were almost out the door when Callie stopped and lifted a happy-faced fabric clown from a child's rocker.

Matt took the clown and glanced at it quizzically. "When you said clown I thought you meant something like a doll. This is as big as a child."

"Wait until you meet Lacey. She thinks very big."

"So do I," Matt warned. "And right this minute I'm ready to think about a shower, followed by a very big steak and a pitcher of iced tea, followed by a big bed." He put the clown back into the chair and placed his hand possessively on Callie's back, nudging her toward the door.

"Shoot, and I thought that thinking big meant something entirely different," she answered teasingly.

"Big, large, enlarged—only a term, my dear, a state of mind that's cussed, discussed,

and rarely understood. W. C. Fields said something to that effect."

Callie laughed. "I don't think he was referring to what you're referring to."

"Hmmm." Matt caught her arm and lowered his voice suggestively. "Wait until we get to our room, and I'll tell you what Rudolph Valentino used to say."

"Rooms," Callie corrected. "I always stay with Rosa Mitchell, an old friend of my grandfather's. Rosa is seventy-eight, and I wouldn't think of shocking her with immoral behavior."

"You've got to be kidding."

Callie hadn't been kidding.

Matt looked ruefully at the heavy pine-log bed and the prim little washstand with the pitcher and bowl, and sighed in disbelief. They were in an old inn, a charming relic dating back to frontier days.

The downstairs had the usual great room, complete with fireplace. The dining room had a couple of huge tables for family-style eating. Two upper floors with rooms opening off a narrow hallway made up the rest of the house.

Rosa Mitchell's quarters were on the ground floor, just behind the guest-registration area. Callie's room was directly above Rosa's on the second floor, and Matt was at the opposite end of the corridor on the third floor. The room was small and hot, and Matt was frustrated beyond belief. He was ready to head back to Sweet Valley—immediately.

He glanced at his watch. He'd been fuming much too long. Callie had announced that she was going to take a long shower, then a nap.

For some reason, she'd trilled lightly, she hadn't slept well the night before. He should take a shower and a nap, too, she'd said primly, then meet her downstairs in the great room by six o'clock. They'd go out for dinner.

Oh, well, if there was anything he'd learned, it was that Callie had her own way of looking at things and her own timetable to follow. He had the feeling that he was being tested, that if he weren't in the lobby at the proper time, she'd simply leave without him. There were certainly enough people in the resort city willing to share their time with Callie. She wouldn't lack for companionship.

Matt pulled fresh clothes from his bag and headed down the hall toward the shower. He was surprised to hear the spray of water. He'd understood he was the only one on that floor, and the other guests had already left the inn for the evening. He leaned against the wall outside the shower and tried not to admit to his disappointment.

He'd been leaning there for a moment before he heard the voice. The person in the shower was singing. It took him a moment to understand the words, something about not sitting under the apple tree with anyone else.

Apple tree? Matt tried the doorknob. It turned beneath his fingertips, and he opened it cautiously. If the woman inside wasn't Callie he was going to feel like an awful fool, in addition to which he was likely to spend the night in the local jail instead of alone in the pine-log bed.

Through a translucent shower door he saw her outline. Matt sighed. He'd recognize those magnificent breasts anywhere.

"Callie!"

"What kept you, Matthew? Can't you understand a subtle invitation when you get one?"

"Why didn't you come down to my room?"

"Rosa gave me explicit instructions to stay out of my young man's room." Callie laughed softly. "She didn't say anything about sharing the shower with him."

Matt stepped inside and shed his clothes. In the shower he took Callie in his arms and felt contentment wash over him as if it had been brought by the warm shower spray.

In his room he'd been edgy and unable to stand still. Now he would be satisfied simply to hold her without moving at all. This woman was a drug that he was rapidly becoming addicted to, and Matt wasn't a man to lose control of his body. He'd never been so emotionally vulnerable before. He shivered.

"Water too cold?" Callie reached behind him and turned up the hot water.

When the stream of heat hit his back, Matt roared. "What are you trying to do to me, woman, burn me up?"

She turned the hot water back down. The desire in her eyes was evident. "I just want you to feel the same way I do, Matthew."

• • •

When Callie slid the emerald-green cotton sweater over her head, she frowned at her reflection in the mirror. Matt had given her a whimsical order not to wear anything revealing. If, as was her custom, she didn't want to wear a bra, that was fine with him, he had said solemnly, but he didn't want any other man to share in the secret.

She turned and surveyed her figure in the mirror. There was no hiding her breasts, but at least they were camouflaged reasonably well by the oversized sweater. With her pale green pants and green jelly shoes, she looked very Irish.

"Begora," she muttered out loud. "Great merciful God, don't be lettin' me get in a brawl with this overbearin', possessive man o' mine."

Quickly she applied a light brush of color on her cheeks and coral lipstick. She brushed through her fine mass of dark hair and caught it back with an orange-and-green chiffon scarf, tying the ends of the scarf in a jaunty bow atop her head. Shades of the forties, she thought, as she gave a final pat to her hair and started downstairs.

Matt was standing by the fireplace in the great room. His hair was still damp. The thickest part appeared almost coffee-colored where it hadn't dried yet. His yellow knit shirt complemented his white cotton pants and white boat shoes. The shirt's tiny monogram and the gold watch on his wrist stamped him with a signature of wealth, she thought.

Tonight that didn't offend her. She felt the breath whoosh out of her as he looked admiringly at her, and she smiled.

"Where's Miss Rosa? I thought she'd be standing guard at the steps like a headmistress in a boarding school," he said teasingly.

"Oh, she went out to dinner with friends. Her other guests went out tonight, too.

Apparently we're alone."

"You mean she was gone when we took that hour-long shower?"

"I believe so," Callie answered airily, and moved into the great room with a show of innocent nonchalance.

"Then why didn't we try out that antique bed in my room instead of ...? Hell, Callie, I'm not used to shower stalls and weird positions."

She laughed. "Ah, Matt. Where's your spirit of adventure? I'll bet you've never made love like that before, have you?"

"No. My back and elbows will never be the same."

Still laughing, she kissed him. Her laughter faded, and she studied him seriously, then spoke in a low voice. "I want you never to grow tired of me. I ..." She hesitated. "I never knew what making love really meant." Callie paused again. "I've got a lot to catch up on, Matthew. No planned obsolescence here, I hope?"

"Sweetheart," he told her, "what you do to me will never be obsolete."

Callie was glad to see that Matt enjoyed their dinner of knockwurst and sauerkraut washed down with heavy, dark beer. Helen's tourist appeal came from a carefully nurtured Bavarian atmosphere, complete with mountain chalets, German restaurants, and what Callie called "oom-pah" music.

"This is a very authentic Alpine atmosphere," Matt said drolly, looking out the restaurant window. "No snow, no Alps. Really authentic."

She punched his shoulder playfully. "Eat your southern fried knockwurst, *mein* lover," she ordered. "The alpine village is as authentic as chalets built among Georgia pines can be."

The small restaurant Callie had chosen must have had more German atmosphere than others in town, Matt decided. The menu's premier item seemed to be lagers of thick beer that were passed about freely among the guests, all of whom knew Callie. He couldn't keep her to himself, as he'd planned. He listened distractedly as a small band played loudly and off key.

"Ve dance, *ja*?" Callie asked in a terrible German accent.

Matt shook his head while she nodded. They grinned at each other.

"*Ja*, you vill dance, Matt," she insisted.

"*Nein*, I vill not. Zee polka eez not for me. *Nein*."

Of course she got him to dance, to try something new, as he had known he would. He danced so badly and she danced so well that they were soon the center of a stomping, clapping crowd. Breathing hard, laughing, he finally stopped embarrassing himself and pulled her out into the sweetly scented June evening.

"Let's walk," Callie suggested.

Matt agreed eagerly, sliding his arm around her waist and adjusting his steps to fit hers. They browsed along the shop fronts, admiring the arts and crafts in the windows.

"I have a friend who collects primitive folk art," Matt said. "He'd love your baskets."

"Ha! You consider my work primitive, do you?"

"You already know that I think your work is excellent. But it falls in the folk-art

category."

"What else do you collect, Matt, besides cars?"

"I lean toward sculpture and oil paintings. I like things I can keep in the house to enjoy."

She chuckled. "The loving way you talk about Ruby, I suspect that you keep your cars in the house."

He blushed, and she chuckled harder. Finally she calmed down and said, "How'd you get specifically interested in convertibles? Paintings, sculpture, and convertibles seem to be a strange combination."

"Because of my father. He bought his first convertible the year I was born. It was a reward he gave himself for his company's success. The car was a 1953 Oldsmobile Starfire." Matt studied the darkening night sky for a moment. "He had to sell it to pay debts. Later I bought it back. I still have it."

She hugged him. "Do you name your cars, the way my Fiesta is named Ruby?"

"No," he said with a growl, his dignity ruffled. She laughed at the exaggerated look of dismay he gave her. "My cars are all male. They don't want frilly names."

"Well, give them macho names." She thought for a moment. "Butch, Spike, Killer ..."

"Arrrgh! Stop!" He pressed one hand over his face in a grand show of chagrin.

"Tell me how you got the rest of your car collection, Matt."

"After I developed my paint formula, I began to look for a place to invest my profits. Do you know how much a classic 1953 convertible in good condition is worth now?"

"No, and I don't think I want to," Callie replied, remembering Ruby parked casually in the barn. She didn't want a dollar value placed on her car. She wanted to enjoy it. "Tell me about your paint. I'm surprised that anybody would make paint that lasts for twenty-five years. You must not get a lot of repeat sales."

"You're right, of course, and we don't market it that way, though that's what it was made for in the beginning. Now it's used in the space program. It can withstand extreme temperatures and pressures in space. The company does a lot of business with hospitals and commercial-building decorators. The paint's too expensive to be of interest to the general public." They'd reached the end of the street and had started back again when Matt stopped before the window of one of the tiny shops. "Look, Callie."

He was pointing to a display of rough stones. A sign said they were locally mined garnets. He tightened his arm around her waist and pulled her inside.

"Hello, Callie." The young man behind the counter smiled broadly. "Good to see you. Who's this?"

"Tony, meet Matt Holland. Matt, this is Tony Spencer. Tony is an old friend. When are you coming to Sweet Valley, Tony?"

"Soon, sweet lady. Very soon. I've missed you and John Henry. Is Matt the latest inhabitant of the smokehouse?"

Callie felt Matt's arm tighten and knew that trouble was brewing and wouldn't be stopped if she didn't say something quickly. She took a deep breath.

"He's my fellow." She smiled wryly. "My main squeeze. My old man. My Big Daddy. My significant other."

She glanced at Matt and was relieved to see him grinning at her comic descriptions.

"Ah," Tony said. "Is there gonna be a marriage for the basket queen, then?"

Callie coughed. "Eh, Tony, Matt is interested in the stones in the window. Why don't you show him a few? He's a collector too."

"Oh? You collect fine jewels?" Tony looked at him curiously.

"In a manner of speaking," Matt answered distractedly. Matt was pleased by the way Callie had described their relationship to Tony. Until now she'd seemed slightly embarrassed by his presence, not sure how to introduce him to her friends.

"Well, come and see my collection," Tony urged.

They followed him to a private room at the back of the store, where Tony retrieved a display case from a small safe. His collection of polished gems was impressive, Matt admitted.

"They all came from the north Georgia hills. People don't realize that we have such treasures in our own backyard," Tony explained.

Matt picked up one particularly brilliant teardrop-shaped stone hanging from a lacy gold chain, and held it up to the light. "Look, Callie. It's raven red, just like Ruby."

"Oh? Do you have a stone like this, Callie?" Tony asked curiously. "One I've never seen? I didn't think you liked jewelry."

"My Ruby isn't a jewel. It's a car." She studied the stone with awe. "This is magnificent."

"Are these stones for sale?" Matt asked.

"Yes, but the price on that one's pretty high. It's one of my better pieces. I could show you something just as lovely that might be in a more acceptable price range."

Callie smothered a laugh. Even though Matt was well dressed, Tony assumed that he was one of the itinerant artists she'd been known to aid. She decided not to intercede. Let Matt get out of this himself.

"Well," Matt said solemnly, "I have a little extra money right now. Maybe we could work something out."

Thirty minutes later, Callie admitted that Matt knew how to barter like a pro. He and Tony had finally agreed on a figure that seemed outrageous to her, but not, apparently, to Matt. Tony placed the garnet pendant in a velvet box, which Matt slipped inside his pocket.

"Come again, Callie," Tony called out as they left the shop. "And if you have any more boarders like him, bring them along."

"Night, Tony, and thanks, but I don't think I'll ever have another boarder like him." She smiled up at Matt, who looked, she thought, exactly like the cat who'd swallowed the canary. "It's still early," she went on. "Would you like a cup of coffee or something before we head back to the inn?"

"Do you think Miss Rosa will be back?"

"I imagine so."

His arm had found its way back around her waist, and his fingers were pulsating gently against the skin beneath her sweater. "I was afraid you'd say that. Why don't we stop by the van? I think I left something there."

"What?" she asked, squeezing his waist and wishing that she could feel his bare skin too.

"I don't know," he whispered, crushing her into the crook of his arm, "but I'll think of something."

The van was parked beneath the lofty limbs of a gnarled cedar tree. There were no streetlights and no car lights to reveal their presence as Matt pulled her into the darkness between the van and the tree, hungrily encircling her with his arms. His kiss was urgent and deep, and Callie's response was just as passionate.

"I think, Caroline Carmichael, that I've seen more than enough of Helen already. It's much too public. Isn't there somewhere else we can go so that we can be alone? I don't think I can keep my hands off you for another whole day."

"Oh, Matt," she said hoarsely, arching against him. "Dear, sweet Matthew ..."

"I'm liable to do something outrageous if I'm forced to listen to more people who think I'm just another of your boarders. Couldn't we just get in the van and—"

"Callie? Is that you out there?" a loud voice called.

Matt groaned. "If it's not John Henry or William or Tyler, it's somebody else." One hand was kneading her breast while the other hand, at her back, was pressing her against his lower body.

Callie drew a shuddering breath. "Yes, Miss Rosa. We're ... we're enjoying the night air."

"Well, why don't you come up on the porch? It's more comfortable here, and I have some nice lemonade and cookies."

"All right," Callie said wearily. "We're coming."

"I wish," Matt teased softly. Callie suppressed a giggle. "For Pete's sake, don't let her turn on the light out here, or she'll see a fine example of male frustration." Callie patted his arm as they started toward the porch.

"Come to my room later, Callie," he urged as they started toward the house. "I'll never be able to go to sleep, knowing you're so close by."

"Sure you will, Matt. Until a few weeks ago you didn't know me. You managed then."

"Maybe, but I don't want to think about managing without you now. I don't ever want to manage without you again."

Callie didn't answer. Fortunately, they'd reached the porch, for she wasn't sure she wanted to pursue his remark any further. This weekend was one thing, but "ever agains" were something she was afraid to consider.

"Did you have a nice evening?" Miss Rosa asked pleasantly.

"Yes, ma'am." Matt's voice was reasonably pleasant in return, Callie thought, in spite of the frustration he was trying desperately to control.

"I'm so glad you have your young man with you, Callie. Helen has changed so, that I don't like to think about a young woman being alone. Why, just last week we had a girl accosted on the street."

"Oh, I agree," Matt said heartily. "Callie definitely shouldn't be alone."

Callie agreed, too, but silently. She'd been to Helen alone many times, and enjoyed the trips. But being here with Matt was more wonderful than she ever could have

imagined. In just the short time they'd been together, she'd begun to build her life around him.

"Now, in my day, a girl would be married and with her husband. Don't understand these modern arrangements," Rosa told them. " 'Course, I was never blessed with children, but my Jess and I, we spent thirty years together before he died."

"Thirty years?" Callie looked out into the night. She could feel Matt's gaze on her, and she wondered if he was agreeing with Miss Rosa that a girl should be married. She breathed deeply, taking in the scent of the mountain air and the essence of the man beside her.

"Are you sure you know where we're going?" Callie caught hold of the armrest on the door of the van to steady herself as Matt hit another rut and they bounced hard. "I think we're lost."

"Oh, no. I may not always know where I am, but I'm never lost." Matt grinned as he rounded a sharp curve and saw a forest glade with a deep stream rushing through it. "See?" Callie decided not to point out that he looked relieved.

Instead of having lunch with Miss Rosa at the inn, Matt had picked up a picnic basket from a local restaurant. Then he'd loaded Callie and the basket in the van. He'd refused to tell Callie where they were going, and for the last few minutes he hadn't been sure that Miss Rosa's directions were accurate.

"Rosa, darling, you were right. It's perfect," he murmured.

"What?" Callie looked around suspiciously. When Matt had hurried them away from the inn in such a mysterious fashion, Miss Rosa had pretended that she had no idea what was going on. She'd just smiled vaguely and said she'd see them later.

Callie grinned. "Matthew, this is a wonderful place." She leaned over to kiss him. "I missed you last night. Come here."

"Oh, you licentious woman. I'm not that kind of boy," he said quaintly, and slid out on the driver's side before her arms could circle his neck.

"What gives?" she demanded. "I want satisfaction. Immediately."

"Greedy, greedy, greedy," he chided as he walked around to her door and opened it. "Always wanting something new. Always feisty. Can't you appreciate old-fashioned courtship?"

"Kiss me," she insisted stubbornly, and pursed her lips.

He held out his arms to lift her down, and she practically leaped into them, expecting to be kissed at last. But he simply put her down, retrieved the picnic basket from the back, and set off through the woods, whistling loudly. Callie scrambled after him.

"Where are we going, you big tease?" she asked.

"Someplace where we can be alone for a very private meeting."

His voice was a little formal, a little stern. "Why?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. We're going to talk, that's all."

"Talk?" The sound of the stream was so loud now that she had to yell. "What a cute euphemism! I love to ... talk ... with you! Let's take off all our clothes and talk up a storm!"

She had a hard time keeping up with him, trying to avoid what she was sure were patches of poison ivy. The trees and lush undergrowth gave off an earthy smell that filled her lungs. Perspiration rolled down her body, and she wondered how long they were going to walk, when suddenly they were out of the woods in a grassy, ethereal little clearing.

"Oh, Matthew!" From a rocky opening in the hillside high above them a cascade of frothy water plunged down into a rock-lined pool of sparkling water. "It's beautiful. Rosa told you about this?"

He put the picnic basket down in the shade of a huge pine tree, unfolded the quilt he was carrying, and spread it on the ground. His movements were tortuously slow and deliberate.

"Miss Rosa and I had a long talk this morning before you woke. She told me this was where Jess brought her when they were courting. This, I suspect, was where they consummated their affections, and I'm not at all sure that event didn't precede the wedding. She's quite a lady, Miss Rosa is. I like her."

"Do you want to go swimming?"

"In a while. What we're going to do now is talk."

"Talk?" she echoed, and a deep sense of dread began to build in her. He meant it. "Wouldn't you rather ...?" She began to unbutton the yellow man's shirt she wore. She slid it off one shoulder, winked at Matt, and said in her best Mae West voice, "Come on over, big boy, and see me sometime. Like right now."

"Don't you take off that shirt, Callie. I know that you're wearing nothing beneath it, and I want us to be able to concentrate on what we're saying."

"Why, is this some kind of meeting of the board?" She was growing more nervous. "You seem upset."

"I'm sorry if it feels that way. I know I get stiff and formal when I'm ... concerned about something. When my dad died I couldn't handle it any other way. It just isn't as easy for me to deal with my feelings as it is to deal with business."

He flexed his shoulders in a way that indicated his tension. She knew how hard he was trying to rid himself of his efficient-businessman's pose, and she wanted to reach out and comfort him. He motioned for her to sit beside him on the quilt.

"I was so uncertain of myself as a teenager," he told her frankly. "I poured every ounce of my energy into studying and working. It was the only way I could survive."

"I don't understand, Matt. You told me you lived with a foster family. Didn't you care about any of them?"

"No. I never let myself care. I didn't want to be hurt ever again. I got used to being a stranger among strangers."

She gathered her strength for a moment. "I know exactly what you mean," she said softly. "I was in boarding schools during most of my childhood. And Father had a succession of housekeepers who tried to play mother to me, but never with much warmth."

"Now we're getting to what I want to talk about." His eyes held hers steadily. "Your mother. I believe it's time you explained about this mystery woman who seems to have

marked your life so vividly."

Callie gave him a tired nod. "I suppose that if I bolted and ran through the woods at this moment, you'd catch me and bring me back. There's no escape."

He arched one brow. "You're right. That's another reason I brought you here."

Callie focused her gaze on a bright clump of jasmine. "My mother," she said slowly, "lived the last half of her life in a high-priced nursing home. She couldn't remember her own name, much less mine, and she spent her days coloring in cartoon books meant for children. Father ran a multimillion-dollar real estate business and traveled almost constantly. When I wasn't away at school, I spent my time with Grandma and Gramps, in Sweet Valley. I kept coming there even after Grandma died."

Matt took her hand and squeezed it gently. "Your mother came from a poor family and your father was wealthy?"

Callie nodded. "Father was driving through Sweet Valley. He stopped at John Henry's service station, and there sat my mother, eighteen years old and the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, from what I've been told by John Henry. Grandma and Gramps had a produce stand in front of the station, and Mother was working it."

Matt's voice was soothing. "So the starry-eyed farm girl runs off with the slick city fellow, right?"

Callie looked at him and shrugged. "Corny, but true. Grandma and Grandpa despised my father, especially after they learned that he was already engaged to be married to a socialite in Atlanta." She sighed. "But when he made good on his vow to marry my mother, they relented a little. And I've been told that Father was good to her, in his own way. She loved him, apparently. I was born less than a year after the wedding."

"What went wrong with the marriage?"

Callie spread her hands in a gesture of futility. "Father came from old money. Very proper. He had a master's degree in business. And here was my fragile little mother, with her high-school education and her mountain ways, trying desperately to fit into his life. She tried too hard."

Callie looked at Matt in despair. "He wanted her to be perfect. He was a damned Professor Higgins to her Eliza Doolittle, but there was no comedy in his version of the story. She'd do anything to be what he wanted."

Matt's voice was low. "What did she do?"

"It was so dumb, such a stupid, senseless thing." Callie caught her lower lip between her teeth, determined not to cry.

"Tell me, love." Matt slid his arms around her neck and brought her forehead against his. "Please."

"She decided to make her face more beautiful with plastic surgery. And ..."

"And what?" He touched his lips gently to her nose and pulled away, taking her hand in his once more.

"Something went wrong, Matt, some kind of oxygen malfunction, and she didn't even know who she was after that. She died then as far as my father and I were concerned. It just took her body years to follow."

Matt sighed painfully. "Oh, Caroline," he whispered. "This explains so much about

you."

"I couldn't change my mother's life, Matt, so I took on everyone else's. I wanted to make the world a better place, so I poured all my energy into the needs of others."

"What about your dad, Callie—didn't he care about you?"

"He immersed himself in his business. If he missed having a daughter, I never knew it. I guess that's easy to do if you're successful."

"Maybe for some," Matt admitted, "but not for me. If I ever have a child, that child will be the most important thing in my life."

He talked more about his love for children. As she listened, Callie found herself comparing their pasts. Matt's father had been a loving, kind man. Hers had been ruthless and self-centered. Both men had been wealthy and successful, but in very different ways. Was Matt more like his own father or like hers? Only time would tell.

"Now," he said finally, and took a deep breath, "I want to tell you about Nancy Caulfield."

"Nancy?"

"The woman I lived with until two years ago."

"I see. What does that have to do with me? Was she one of your treasures worth keeping?" She felt a coldness descend on her. She didn't like the way the conversation was going. His past hadn't mattered to her before. She didn't want it to matter now.

"No. At the time I thought she was. She was an attorney. We met during her last year in law school. She was very busy, and very broke. My work has always kept me on a tight schedule, and for the first time I'd found a woman who didn't mind. From law school she was hired by one of Atlanta's best firms, and started her climb to the top.

"When she reached the top and didn't have to work as hard, she didn't need me any longer. Between my work and my hobbies I wasn't as interested in a social life as she was. Eventually she traded me in for a man who didn't spend all his time in the office or in the past."

"Why are you telling me all this, Matt?"

"Because," he said softly, "I want you to know me, to know my history and what I've been through. Please, Callie, don't lock me out of your life. You know that this isn't just a casual weekend, for either of us."

"No," she admitted, feeling the lump in her throat threaten to close off her reply.

"I know now that I only picked Nancy because she was a safe bet after the disaster I called a marriage. Ambitious, on her way to the top of the legal world, she would never challenge me in the arena of feelings." He smiled grimly. "You see, Caroline, you have ways of avoiding emotional intimacy, and so do I."

"Matt, I don't care about Nancy or any of the other women in your life. As you say, that's in the past, and you know I'm firmly ensconced in the present."

She said the words flippantly, giving him the reply he'd expected, knowing that the words were a lie. She didn't want to think about Matt with another woman, even if it was in the past. Callie shook her head, trying to clear the confusion she felt. She kissed Matt's cheeks, and nibbled her way toward his mouth.

"Let's think about the present, Matt. Stop talking, please."

He gently grasped her arms and held her away. "No, not yet, Callie, my love. We aren't done yet. I need to know about Tyler."

"Tyler?" she asked in surprise. "You already know about Tyler."

"Yes, I know about the divorce. Tell me about the marriage. I want to know why you've avoided men since."

"Oh. Why?"

This time he did move closer, taking her hand as if she were a small child who needed reassurance. "Because your marriage to Tyler is part of you, and I need to know. I want to know you. Please, I wish you'd just open up and let me see the real Callie."

He was concerned, she realized. And his interest wasn't sexual; it was the attention given by one close friend to another. She felt her tension begin to melt.

"I was a freshman in college when I met Tyler," she murmured. "He was an art student. He was beautiful, Matt—dark, brooding, just what you'd expect an artist to look like. The exact opposite of my father, with his Ivy League education and Gucci shoes. But Tyler was poor. His family was living on welfare, and he had to work his way through school."

"You loved him anyway."

"Oh, yes. But I was a very young eighteen, Matt. I know now that what I loved was the romantic image of marrying an idealistic artist. Oh, we had some wild, wonderful times together. We'd stay up all night, finding solutions to the world's problems, go roller-skating through downtown Atlanta's deserted streets until dawn. We thought we were discovering life and all its passions."

Matt winced. He knew he had to hear it all, but he didn't want to think about Callie and another man. He wanted her to say Tyler hadn't meant anything, that she hadn't known what passion was until he'd come along.

"There was a time," she went on stoically, "when I thought that all I ever wanted in the world was Tyler Winter. He was the exact opposite of the man my mother had chosen, and I knew that with him life would be an adventure."

"You had a good marriage."

"At first. I've already told you about the traveling we did, and the causes we worked for. It was great, but there came a time when ... we had to have money. And Tyler was magnanimous in doing the right thing. He did what he had to do to provide for me—"

Matt took her by the shoulders and pulled her against him as though he could absorb the pain he felt radiating from her. He wished he hadn't started this, but they'd come too far to stop now.

"Tell me about it, Callie. Why did Tyler change? The man I met didn't seem a bit like the Tyler you loved."

Matt wasn't going to make it easy for her. He was going to bring it all back, the hurt and the loss. She felt her insides revolt as she fought against dredging up the bitterness that she'd kept buried inside.

"I got pregnant, and I ... I was very ill. The baby was born prematurely, and needed very expensive medical care. Tyler wouldn't accept charity from my father, but he did accept a job. He gave up his art, cut his hair, and shaved the beard he'd always had. He

got hooked on real estate.” She smiled tautly. “He changed. My Lord, he and Father became pals.”

Matt slid around behind her, pulling her into the circle of his body with her back against his chest, clasping his arms beneath her breasts so tightly that he felt her heart beating.

“And the baby?” Matt kept his voice very gentle.

“The baby died.”

“And the marriage?”

“It died, too, Matthew. By that time Tyler had discovered that he liked money. I can’t blame him. He’d never had any, so it was only natural that he’d appreciate it more than I did. So ... he’s been very successful in real estate. He became the son my father never had. He became a Carmichael, and I left.”

“But he never got over you, did he? That’s why he keeps coming around.”

“Maybe, I don’t know. But I haven’t loved Tyler for a long time. He’s been more like a brother than an ex-husband.”

“And after you left him you became even more devoted to embracing every cause and every unfortunate soul in need.”

“I’ve been running from a lot of disappointment,” she told him. “It’s easy to hide in other people’s problems.”

“Oh, Callie.” Matt hugged her, and nuzzled his face in her hair until he found the side of her neck. “I know. I’ve been running too.” He kissed her ear. Then he turned her around so that they were facing each other. Matt held out his arms. “Run to me, Callie. Let me be a part of you.”

Callie snuggled deep in his arms. “For now,” she whispered, not allowing herself to think of longer. “For now—if you’re sure.”

“Oh, yes, Caroline Carmichael. I’m very sure.”

She nodded and tightened the grip of her arms around his waist. “I care for you, too, Matt, maybe more than I should. Heavens, how you’ve made me want to love you. I think you can do anything you set your mind to, and that scares me.”

“I’m not ruthless like your father, Callie. Don’t make me into an ogre. This is new to me, and I don’t want to mess it up.” He loosened her grip and guided her back against the quilt, while he untied the knot she’d made in the tail of her loose shirt.

“Let me,” she insisted urgently.

“No. You just lie there and let me love you.”

“Oh, Matt,” she said softly, waiting, studying the loving expression on his face as he opened her shirt and lifted her slightly while he removed it. He placed his thumbs beneath the band of her shorts and peeled them down her legs.

“Ah, Callie, I knew you wouldn’t be wearing anything underneath.” He stood and removed his jeans, dropping them to the ground.

“Matt,” she exclaimed softly. “You aren’t wearing underwear either. I’m so pleased.”

“See what you’ve done to me. I’m not the same man I once was.”

“And I’m a different woman. Oh, Matt, you’ve been right about one thing all along.” She smiled gently. “It takes an understanding of the past to appreciate the present.”

Callie could barely contain her desire when he settled on his knees beside her. He studied her without touching her until she felt her body begin to tremble with the sweet agony of her need. At last she could understand the passion that must have driven her mother to risk everything to please the man she had married. Callie had never wanted anything so much as she wanted to please Matt.

The sun found Callie's body, falling across her like a spotlight. Matt made a soft sound of appreciation. Her skin was the color of honey, touched with the blush of the warm rays that filtered through the leaves of the trees above them. He reached for his jeans and retrieved the garnet pendant from the pocket.

"No," she said immediately. "Matt, I can't—"

"You must have known I was buying it for you." He placed a finger over her lips to silence her. "Please." His voice dropped. "Please." He tried to joke. "Consider it a trial acceptance. Try it. If, in a week or two, you still feel funny about wearing it, give it back."

Her eyes filled with tears, but she said nothing. Matt drew his finger down her chin to her throat, then ran it lightly along the center of her chest. He placed the pendant there and fastened the delicate chain around her neck.

Between her breasts the red garnet pendant seemed to shimmer with the light and the soft warmth of the body it adorned.

"There," he whispered. "You make the jewel glow."

"Kiss," she ordered hoarsely, and pointed to her mouth.

He forced himself to control his passion as he leaned down and pressed his mouth to hers. He let his lips begin to weave the spell of sweet magic that would join them to the special promise of this place.

When she opened her mouth, eagerly accepting his tongue and responding with the heat of her readiness, he moved even more slowly. He wouldn't allow her to sweep him away in a rush of pleasure. With great control he began to touch her, examining every part of her body with agonizing slowness. He wanted to please her, but more, he wanted her to understand how special they were together.

He pulled away from her lips, then moved his mouth to her nipple, pulling it into the deep, hot curve of his tongue, tormenting her with his slow, erotic suckling. He couldn't get enough of the picture she presented, openly arching herself in invitation.

The sun brought beads of moisture to her skin, giving it a silvery sheen. Her breasts swelled, increasing the size of the dusky areolas surrounding the tight buds of her nipples. Her lips parted and her pink tongue rimmed the outer edges, capturing the moisture he'd left with his kisses.

Then he straddled her, and she felt the tremor that rolled through his muscular legs as they touched her thighs. His lower body was rebelliously protesting his restraint. He lowered himself and began rubbing his readiness against the soft inner skin of her thighs, reveling in their satiny textures.

He let the length of his body settle on hers as he continued to straddle her. His hands held her legs together as he cradled himself in the moist skin so near the center of her femininity. She gasped and began rubbing against him, and he braced himself to control

the eruption her movements threatened to provoke.

"No!" he said. "No, Callie, be still. Not yet."

"But, Matt, I can't stop it. I want—"

He gasped. "Oh, so do I. But be still, absolutely still for a moment. I'll show you."

He felt Callie tighten her muscles and hold back, allowing him to lie there, his desire pulsating gently between them. When at last he entered her, she possessed him completely, and Matt felt as if the beauty of their joining linked them with all the beauty in the world.

For a long time afterward they lay still, their perspiration-slick bodies entwined. They'd been lovers, but more than that, they had loved.

"Thank you, John Henry," she whispered.

"Thank you, John Henry?" Matt said in exasperation.

Smiling, she turned and kissed Matt's cheek. "For sending me a hot-blooded city man."

Eight

There was no longer any doubt in Matt's mind that he was going to marry the woman who sat beside him in the van. He'd tried not to think about what he was doing and where it would lead, but he knew he'd never been so happy in his life.

Matt glanced over at Callie. She was asleep, scrunched up in a crumpled ball in the corner of her seat, smiling as she napped. Another oversized man's shirt, bright red this time, was caught at the waist and tied like the yellow one she'd worn that morning.

The red shirt brought back the thought of the red convertible stored so carelessly in the barn at Sweet Valley. He'd searched for that car for years, always coming in too late behind another buyer when one of the few Fiestas was unearthed. He'd passed over other, more expensive automobiles because the Fiesta was the one he wanted. Once he owned it, his collection of 1953 General Motors convertibles would be complete.

He'd covered the United States in his search, and when he'd finally located the prize he was seeking he'd found another prize even more rare—Callie Carmichael.

He sighed, wondering how he was going to adjust to being married to such a woman. He'd had a hard enough time leaving her to shower and change before they left. Simply going to work every day would be a wrench. He couldn't wait to show her off to all those society matrons who'd tried to match him up with their daughters, and all the wives of business associates who'd had more in mind when they offered their friendship than simply advancing their husbands' careers.

"Matt?"

She was awake.

"Yes?"

"I was just wondering. In all your business dealings, have you ever met my father, Wesley Carmichael?"

"No, I don't think so. Why?"

She straightened up, threading her fingers through her hair and repositioning her clothing. "I think I'd like to see him sometime, but it's been years since we talked last, and I don't know how well a meeting would go. We've had some pretty horrible fights in the past."

"Why don't I call him for you? We'll have lunch. I'll go with you as a negotiator."

"Thank you, but I think this is something I have to do on my own." She reached across the van and hugged him, pressing herself against his arm as she kissed his cheek. "For a tough businessman, you're pretty soft."

"For a mountain witch, you're pretty, period." He grinned. "It's late. Do you want to stop and get something to eat before we reach the cabin?"

"Nope." She grinned, and stretched suggestively. "What I want is more important than food. Can't you drive a little faster?"

He glanced over at her suspiciously. "You want me to end up in jail for speeding?"

"No. Jail isn't the place I had in mind at all."

He hurried.

John Henry's garage was dark when they drove through Sweet Valley. With the van windows open and the evening breeze wafting the smell of honeysuckle and spring flowers, the drive up to the cabin brought the scents of the night inside, and Matt breathed deeply. He'd never been so aware of taste and touch and smell.

They headed up the winding driveway to Callie's cabin. "Damn!" he thundered. Lights blazed from every part of the cabin. "Somebody's here."

He pulled up to the gate that marked the boundary of the yard. Callie got out and opened the gate, closing it behind the van after Matt drove inside. He cut the engine and hurried after Callie. She came to a sudden stop, and he nearly ploughed into her.

"Lacey!" Callie exclaimed. The lavender van parked beside the garden practically glowed in the half-light that spilled out the kitchen window. Callie turned toward Matt, a mixture of happiness and frustration clearly visible on her face.

"Lacey, the clown lady?" Matt asked wryly.

"Oh, Matt. I'm sorry. I knew it was about time for her, but I didn't expect her tonight. I didn't want her to be here tonight. I'll—"

But whatever Callie had in mind was forgotten when the cabin door opened and a pint-sized, real-life Shirley Temple rushed out to greet them.

"Callie! John Henry told me you had a man up here, but I didn't believe it!"

Matt groaned. Callie's friends had never learned the fine art of subtlety. Lacey was red-haired, blue-eyed, and charged with energy. When she reached Matt she stood on tiptoes and kissed him warmly on both cheeks before standing back and openly surveying the two of them. "I'm still not sure I believe it. But he's gorgeous, Callie. You've done yourself proud."

"Believe it," Matt retorted more gruffly than he'd intended as he pulled Callie possessively into the curve of his arm.

Callie looked from Matt to Lacey in dismay. She'd loved having Lacey stay with her before, yet this time she couldn't help wishing her friend had waited another week. She'd need Lacey when Matt was gone—but not yet.

Gone? What was she thinking? Callie shivered and pressed herself against Matt. Of course he'd be gone next week. Reality came crashing over her. The weekend was over.

He'd go back to Atlanta. He had a business to run, and it took a lot of his time. No telling when she'd see him again. All weekend she'd blocked out that kind of thinking, refusing to face the inevitable, because she was in love.

Love? She felt the breath leave her lungs, and the ground seemed to shift slightly. How could she have been so foolish? That was exactly what she'd done. Just like her mother, she'd gone and fallen in love with a wealthy man. She'd never intended to love Matthew Holland. Heavens, no. She'd had an adventure, a fantastic weekend, with a man who knew how to satisfy her.

Matt was fond of possessing things, and she had a feeling that deep down he considered her just another collector's item. It was all too much to think about. Callie

touched her forehead and wondered why her skin felt so clammy. Too ... many ... thoughts ...

"Callie? Callie?" She heard Lacey's voice as though she were calling from far away.

"Wake up, sweetheart." That was Matt's voice, she realized, and it was full of barely controlled fear,

Swirling through a sea of darkness, Callie forced herself back to the light.

What had happened? Matt was in one of the rocking chairs on the porch, holding her in his lap. Lacey was about to wipe her face with a damp cloth.

"Hey, kid, are you all right?" Lacey brought the cloth around the back of her neck and down into the V of her open shirt. Matt stroked her forehead. Callie felt his fingers tremble.

"I'm fine. Good heavens, what happened?"

"You passed out," Matt said gruffly. "I think I'll put you back in the van and take you down to that doctor in town."

"No, Matt," she insisted, pulling herself upright in his lap. "I just had a dizzy spell. I'm perfectly all right now, but I think I'd like to lie down for a while."

"Fine." Matt lifted her easily and strode through the tiny living room, only half-seeing the mounds of colorful materials and unfinished clowns on the couch and floor. He went into the bedroom and placed Callie on the soft mattress, then sat down beside her, holding her hands tightly. Callie closed her eyes. "You relax while I bring in our bags. We'll get a good night's sleep, and tomorrow we'll pack whatever you need and take it back to Atlanta with us. I'll have my doctor check you out there."

"Fine," Callie whispered wearily, without paying attention. She sensed Lacey standing in the doorway, but she didn't open her eyes.

"For the time being, we'll get Lacey to look after William and Esmeralda," Matt said in a soothing voice. Callie frowned. He was trying to take charge, just as he had in Helen as they'd delivered her baskets. "Later, when Lacey's ready to leave, we'll have to make some kind of decision about what to do."

Callie finally got her overwrought mind to work properly. "What do you mean, Matthew, by later?"

"Well, I can't run a business from up here, Callie. We'll have to live in Atlanta."

"Live in Atlanta?" Callie opened her eyes and raised herself up, all weakness leaving her in a flood of icy emotion as she realized exactly what he intended.

"Callie, you'll have to come with me. I want to marry you."

"Why?"

"Because I love you." He hadn't meant to say it at quite this time. Matt glanced over as Lacey tiptoed away and closed the door, giving them privacy.

"No!" Callie's voice was low and angry.

"Callie," Matt began.

"I said no, Matthew Holland. This is my house, my bed, and my body, and I'll decide what happens to each of them. I'm not going to Atlanta." She closed her eyes to shut out the frown on his face. "I told you in the beginning how I felt about wealth and success. I'm not going to marry you and I'm not going anywhere."

"I see," Matt said coolly. "Apparently I misunderstood what was happening. I thought you were feeling the same things I was. I hadn't planned this any more than you, but it happened."

"I never tried to fool you, Matt. You know that I care, that I share the same feelings, but I can't do what you want. You're too possessive. I'm crazy about you, but you want to change me too much."

"I see," he said slowly. "And what did you plan for us? Did you expect us to come back tonight, part company, and go our separate ways as though nothing had happened?"

"I don't know," Callie admitted, realizing that the moment she hadn't wanted to face had arrived. She glanced toward the door, looking for Lacey to give her the support she so desperately needed.

She was hanging on by a thread. The very thought of Matt's leaving her was cutting her heart into tiny slivers, but she knew that she didn't belong back in Atlanta with him, and she couldn't adjust to his life-style.

Matt watched her, seeing the pain she was trying so hard to conceal. He loved her. He'd accepted that reality. He'd faced it and opened himself up to her because he'd believed that underneath all her foolishness about wealth and success, she felt something for him too.

"Couldn't we be friends, Matt? I mean, that's the modern thing to do, isn't it? You could come up on weekends for a while, and we could see how things develop."

"Friends? Don't you mean casual lovers, Callie? We'd share an occasional roll in the hay in between the times when you're protesting something or making baskets or entertaining your other 'friends.' "

"You want to trap me," she said in a desperate voice. "You don't want me to be myself!"

"I want you to come back to the real world!" Matt took a deep breath and shook his head. "Do you honestly think I could join your little band of refugees, dropping in and out of your life? No! As old-fashioned as it sounds, I want marriage and a commitment."

He was losing her. He could see the fear in her eyes, and it was his fault. He'd barged ahead, taking charge, as he'd always done, without realizing that he was moving too fast.

"Callie, I love you. I'm not your father or Tyler. I won't disappoint you. I won't smother you. I don't know how to get through this wall you've built around yourself."

"You want to change me," she insisted.

"You've changed me, haven't you? Not all change is bad. You've made me see myself clearly. From the day we met I began to change."

He captured her mouth in an angry, anguished kiss. He devoured her, took her refusal and turned it into a force that burned inside the deepest part of her. His own anger met the depth of Callie's fear and exploded into a passion that quickly swept over both of them. This loving was not gentle and giving; it was a fire fed with the fury of his hurt, and he fanned it into an awesome measure of his despair.

"Lacey?" she whispered.

"To hell with Lacey." He groaned, and stripped away the clothing that separated

them.

"Matt, take me, just make love to me one more time...."

"Not just one more time." He plunged wildly inside her, feeling the moist heat of her surround and capture him as he poured his pain into her with a vengeance that he could not control.

Callie tried to hold back, to hold on to some thread of reason. She tightened her muscles and willed her body to remain stiff and unresponsive. She tried, but her body refused to comply with her directives. Her heart began to pound, and every nerve ending in her body began to vibrate with need. The very touch of the sheet beneath her back set off spasms of desire, and she could hold back no longer.

Rising to meet him, she abandoned herself to the torrential flood she felt roaring within, and in some distant part of her mind she heard her moans of need turn into cries of triumph as she was swept away in a shudder of pure ecstasy.

As Matt relaxed on top of her she hugged him tightly. He was right. He needed her. Nothing else mattered. She couldn't lose this man. She'd learned to love the vulnerable little boy who'd worked nonstop to regain what his father had lost. In his own way he was as injured by his past as she was by hers. Somehow they'd work it out.

And then he pulled away, lifted himself from her body and her bed. Callie sought his gaze, ready to tell him that she had been wrong, ready until she saw the look of bitterness and disgust etched in his stony face.

"I'm sorry, Callie. That was inexcusable of me. Maybe an occasional night of physical release is enough for you, but it's not for me. I want marriage and children. I want you in my bed every night, and in every hour of my life. I want you in Atlanta."

"That won't work for me, Matthew." She felt tears slide down her cheeks.

"Someday you may learn that love is enduring and encompassing. I want that enduring kind of love where two people grow together. It could have been very special between us, Callie. There's nothing wrong with the old ideals of love and marriage. But you're a free spirit, and I've learned to collect only that which withstands the test of time."

Callie pulled a quilt across her naked body and silently watched him dress. When he finished he turned and looked at her, his eyes glittering "Good-bye, Matthew," she whispered.

He started to say something, then stopped, unable to speak. "I love you," he finally managed to say, and walked out.

Matt pitched Callie's bag onto the porch. He touched his cheek and realized that tears were rolling down his face. He was crying. The last time he'd cried had been at the death of his father.

Oh, Lord, what had he done? He couldn't believe what had just happened. Callie Carmichael was the best thing that had ever happened to him, and he'd ruined their relationship.

"Your name's Matt, isn't it?"

The voice startled him. He'd forgotten that they weren't alone. The woman standing in the shadows behind him was soft-spoken and hesitant.

"Yes. I'm afraid I didn't remember that you were here, Miss ..."

"Just Lacey."

"Lacey. You'll have to forgive our poor display of ... whatever the hell it was."

"I just wanted to say that I'm sorry if I caused a problem between you and Callie. If I'd known, I'd never have come."

"You didn't cause the problem," Matt admitted, "and if it hadn't been you, it would have been someone else. This would have happened sooner or later, and I suppose it's just as well that it happened now, before things went any further."

"You're in love with Callie?"

"I don't suppose it matters if I tell you. Yes, I'm in love with her. From the first time I saw her standing here in the sunlight in her silly overall cut-offs I've been acting like some love-sick teenager." He smiled bitterly. "She thought that John Henry had sent me to 'court' her. As it turned out, I haven't been able to think of anything or anyone else."

"But she's very independent. Maybe you just need to give her some time."

"No," Matt said with finality. "Callie doesn't want me or anything I represent, and I can't change what I am, not even for her. Look after her, Lacey."

"I will, Matt, and who knows, she may find out that life isn't so good without love."

Callie paced up and down the porch, stopping every few minutes to shade her eyes and peer off into the distance. The heat was unbearable. It seemed that August was determined to break all records for high temperatures. She wiped the perspiration from her forehead and caught at the post holding up the roof.

Not only had the heat jumped off the thermometer, but it seemed to be affecting her strangely. She felt totally off balance. It was nothing but her body protesting the absence of Matt's touch, she told herself as she turned and dropped into the rocker.

"Don't you think it would help if you told me about Matt?" Lacey asked from her spot on the edge of the porch. She took a sewing needle out of the corner of her mouth and quit arranging pleats in the piece of satin she held. "I've been around here for six weeks, and I'm getting tired of watching you stare off down the driveway all the time, Callie."

"What is there to talk about?" Callie knew she sounded peevish and short-tempered. "Sorry. I'm a beast," she muttered.

"Yep, but I like you anyhow. I'm just worried. For the last six weeks I've watched you come totally unglued. You don't sleep. You went down to join that protest group at City Hall and got there on the wrong day, and on top of that, you didn't even remember to take your sign. You don't eat, and what you do eat seems to come back up before you get it down."

"You noticed that too? I'm sorry, kiddo. I didn't know that I was quite so obvious."

"Don't you think it's time you took yourself to the doctor? I think something is wrong."

"You're right, Lacey. Something is wrong. I thought things were bad when I left Tyler. But nothing, absolutely nothing, in my life has ever been this bad before. Everywhere I look I see Matt." Callie put her head in her hands. "Oh, it doesn't do any good to talk about it. Let's change the subject."

"Okay. John Henry stopped by while you were out walking in the woods. He just said to tell you that Tom Hicks's chickens got some kind of virus. Looks like they're all going to die."

Callie looked at her in speechless horror. "Tom can't afford a loss like that. He has a mortgage payment due soon." She stood up quickly. "I've got to help, if I can."

"What can we do, John Henry? Do I have enough money to do him any good?"

"Callie, he needs five thousand dollars."

Callie thought for a long moment. "Tell Tom I'll loan him the money."

"But where are you gonna get that much?"

"I'll get it, don't worry."

"Caroline, are you feeling all right? You look a little peaked."

"I'm fine. It's just the heat," she murmured, blotting the perspiration on her forehead with the sleeve of her cotton shirt.

"Maybe, but don't you think you ought to let me—"

"Now, look here, John Henry." She shook a finger wearily at him. "The last thing I need is your brand of help. If it hadn't been for you I wouldn't have gotten mixed up with Matt."

"Have you heard from him?" John Henry asked casually.

"Of course not. I don't have a phone, and he'd know better than to call me if I did."

"There's such a thing as the United States mail. And you still have a car he wants. I kinda thought he might come back to make one more offer on Ruby."

"If and when he comes here, John Henry, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't talk to him about me. I don't want him to think I've been upset."

"Sounds like you're kinda expecting him back. Don't seem like you'd be too sorry to see him, either," he muttered under his breath. "By the way, what are you going to do with your convertible?"

"The same thing I've been doing," she said, blowing a strand of hair off her forehead.

"Tell me, Callie, do you like your log cabin?"

"Of course I do. You know that I never want to live anywhere else."

"And if I picked up that cabin and set it down in the middle of the Atlanta baseball stadium, would you suddenly hate it?"

"Hate it? Certainly not. I'd like the cabin no matter where it was."

"Then I don't see why that doesn't apply to Matt."

"But that's different."

"Are you sure?"

"Certainly I'm sure. Matt's a man."

"And you need a man. Reckon I'll have to start looking again."

"Looking? Oh, no, you don't. I don't want another procession of men through my yard. I don't want a man, John Henry. If I wanted a man, I'd want"—she caught back a sob of despair—"I'd want Matt."

"I'd give some serious thought to telling him that, Callie, my girl. Your grandfather wanted you to be happy. He never wanted you to let your mother's mistakes ruin your

life. Go home and think about it. I told you once, it's not money and it's not a place that makes people happy. It's having somebody to love you."

"And it's not money or a place that makes people unhappy either. Oh, I wish I'd never seen Matthew Holland. Until he came I could do what I wanted, when I wanted, and never had to worry about tomorrow. Now"—her voice wavered—"I don't care if there is a tomorrow. I don't seem to be able to do anything except think about the past. I'm turning into Matt."

"Maybe," John Henry agreed, shifting the match stem he had clenched in his mouth, "and maybe Matt's spending all his time thinking about what the future could be like if he had you. You two seemed to have swapped places."

Phil Myers stuck his head in at the open door to Matt's executive-office suite. Matt glanced up and saw an unusually large grin on his partner's pudgy face.

"Hey, Holland," Phil called. "A bunch of weirdos are staging a protest across the street. They don't want Texamite to cut down the old oak trees that the garden clubs planted back in the thirties. A friend of mine called from WGST radio to let us in on the action. The police are about to come cart them off—the weirdos, not the oak trees, that is. Looks like fun. Want to grab a cup of coffee and come watch the sideshow?"

Matt stopped dictating a letter to Margaret, his secretary, and leaped to his feet. His heart pounded a tattoo against his eardrums.

"Weirdos," he said urgently. "Callie."

He raced out the office door and found a window that faced the street. Pressing both hands against the cool glass, he peered down at the pitifully small group of protesters waving signs. Poor slobs, he thought sympathetically. They didn't have a chance. He looked hard at the women until he saw one with a head of dark hair. From a distance he couldn't be positive, but ...

"Caroline," he whispered hoarsely. "You're here."

As Matt ran for the elevator, he passed Phil and Margaret.

"Didn't know you loved oak trees so darned much," Phil called jovially.

The air was muggy and oppressive. Matt cursed it as he dodged traffic to cross the street. His dear woman was out trying to save a bunch of ancient trees in this awful weather. He'd coax her inside the office, and then ...

"Caroline!" he yelled as he ran up behind the dark-haired woman. Matt slid his arms around her waist and nuzzled his face in her thick hair.

"Help!" the stranger squealed. Then she twisted around and whacked him with a floppy piece of poster board.

Matt let go of the unfamiliar woman immediately, and stepped back, speechless. "I apologize," he managed to tell her with brusque formality, and straightened his suit. He felt a blush combine with the heat to turn his face beet red.

The other protesters gathered around him. Suddenly he knew how Custer felt at the Little Big Horn.

"You're from Texamite, aren't you?" a tiny elderly woman said accusingly.

"Oh, no, ma'am, I'm—"

"Take that!"

Matt raised one arm just in time to ward off the hard thump of her purse as it came toward his head. Police sirens wailed to a stop nearby, and blue uniforms were suddenly everywhere. The protesters dispersed, chanting and waving their signs. Matt sighed, and started back toward the street, feeling despondent. Where was Callie? She never missed this kind of protest. What was wrong with her?

Suddenly a burly hand clasped his arm. "Hold it there, bud," an officer said with a growl. "Don't try to sneak out on us."

"But ... but ..." Matt began to protest. The officer shook his head and began reading him his rights.

Matt sighed. Then he calmly squinted up at the Holland Paint building and waved, hoping that Phil might see what was happening and come bail him out. As the officer led him away Matt realized how deeply Callie had affected his life. She got him into adventures even when she wasn't around. Lord, he had to get her back somehow.

Pregnancy was the only reason Callie hadn't attended the oak-tree protest.

She drove home slowly from Dr. Campbell's office. She was distracted, and, thankfully, Ruby seemed to know the way home by herself.

"Surprise, surprise," Callie said out loud. "I'm going to be a mommy."

She'd just wanted to hear those words spoken. Now that she had, she admitted that Doc Campbell's announcement hadn't been a real shock. All she had to do was recall the last time she and Matt had made love, that careless, wild encounter right before he'd left. That was when it had happened.

Weeks earlier she'd begun to feel the evidence, the swimmy head, the nausea, the odd sensations her body sent out. At first, as she took her daily walks, she'd tried to reject the possibility that she was carrying Matt's child.

But for the last few days she'd begun to feel a peculiar sense of contentment. In spite of the bouts of morning sickness, she'd walk around daydreaming, in such a fog of sensations that she couldn't even remember where she'd been until she would come to and realize that she was cradling her stomach with her hands and staring off into the distance with a smile on her face. Lacey had begun to study her secretly, and she knew her observant friend wouldn't be fooled for long.

She wasn't.

They were sitting on the porch of the cabin, watching fireflies dance through the velvet darkness across the valley, when Lacey dived into the problem head on.

"So what do you plan to do?"

"Do?" Callie pretended not to understand.

"Are you going to tell him?"

"Tell who what?"

"Don't pretend with me, Callie Carmichael. You're pregnant. You and I both know it, and I get the feeling that you're pleased as punch."

Callie felt a surge of pride wash over her as she considered Lacey's words. "You're right," she admitted. "I can't explain it, but I am pregnant and I'm very pleased. I want

to have a child. I want to have this child.”

“Are you going to tell him?”

“No! He’d insist on our getting married, and I don’t want that.”

“Why ever not, Callie? The man loves you.”

“The baby will be fine. I’ll be both mother and father.”

“Sure, and you’ll be Santa Claus and the Easter bunny. A child has enough problems in today’s world. It seems to me you’re sentencing yourself to a pretty lonely future.”

“I won’t be lonely,” Callie protested. “I’ll have my child.”

“Being lonely is one thing, but having loved a man and having to live without that love is a different kind of loneliness. Lonely women are unhappy women, and unhappy women don’t always make the best mothers.”

Lacey was right. No matter how much she tried to deny it, everywhere Callie looked she saw Matt. Sometimes she’d glance up from her basket work, startled, thinking she’d just heard Matt’s voice. And William seemed cranky these days, as if he missed Matt and blamed her for his departure. Callie told herself the heat was making both her and William overimaginative.

And then, one morning when she got up, the gate was standing open and William was gone.

She found a letter thumb-tacked to the gate. It was printed on expensive stationery stamped with gold initials and it read simply, "If you ever want to see, hear, or smell William again, come to my home in Atlanta. Alone. Tell the cops to stay clear or I'll turn your homicidal goat loose on their cars."

It was signed, "Matt," and underneath he'd given directions to his house.

Callie couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry. Matt was taking charge again, trying to twist her plans to suit himself, but it was hard to resist a man who'd go to the trouble of kidnapping an ugly, smelly, neurotic goat just to get her attention.

"All right, Matthew," she whispered. "I'll retrieve William and we'll talk." She folded the note carefully and carried it into the house, her chin high. Before she talked to Matt about the possibility of a future together, she'd see her father and decide if they could overcome their differences.

It hurt Callie a little when her father merely glanced up at her over a stack of papers on his enormous rosewood desk. Distracted, he returned to his reading and punched an intercom button on his sleek telephone.

"Mary, I told you I didn't want to be disturbed. This report has to be complete—"

"Hello, Daddy."

His finger, with its manicured nail, snapped away from the intercom button. He stood quickly. "Callie?"

She could tell from the shocked expression on his face that her father was surprised. In fact, she decided with pleasure, he was more nearly dumbfounded.

It was mutual. She'd never before realized how handsome he was. She'd never allowed herself to see him as more than a shadowy figure who hovered on the fringe of her life. Funny, she'd never realized before how short he was. She was only an inch or so shorter than he. In her mind he'd always touched the ceiling when he walked.

Wesley Carmichael came around his desk and moved slowly toward her. "Is it really you? After all this time, you've actually come to see me?" His voice was a whisper, an emotionally charged rope of uncertain words. "Why?"

He was very reserved in a way that reminded her of how Matt had acted when they had first met. She'd learned that underneath Matt's reserve lay a warm, sensitive human being. Now she wondered if the same was true of her father.

"I wanted to tell you ... that I finally understand," she murmured.

"Understand what?"

He stood not more than twelve inches from her, but he could have been across the world. His dark hair was fringed with silver, and deep lines radiated outward from the corners of his eyes and across his forehead.

"About the way you loved Mother, and the way she loved you. I came to say that I'm

sorry I made your pain over her even greater."

Her father took her hand and led her to the couch, where he sat stiffly beside her. Callie thought how odd, how utterly like her father it was to be so polite and formal in the midst of this emotional reunion.

"You've come at last," he murmured. He studied her intently for many seconds. She kept her gaze on him and lost track of everything around her. "You've changed, Callie. You're softer. There's a gentleness about you that reminds me of your mother."

He reached out and curled her hair behind one ear. His intimate gesture shocked her, and she felt tears pressuring the backs of her eyelids. He smiled uncertainly.

"What can I do for you, Callie?" Now she saw in his eyes the earnest desire to please her. She cleared her throat roughly.

"Perhaps ... perhaps we could start by going to lunch."

He looked wistful. "You don't ask me for much. You've never asked me for much. And I've always had so much to give." She looked away, her eyes burning. "It doesn't matter," he added quickly. "You're here, and that's all I care about. Come on. We'll scare up the biggest steak this side of the Mason-Dixon line, and I'll insist that you talk my ears off, the way you did when you were very little. Remember?"

She remembered. Over lunch she talked and he listened, and they felt the years soften into a blur. They weren't close, Callie knew, and they might never be, but she'd made a first step, and she felt a special glow as she left the restaurant with her arm through his. She'd told him all about Matt, and he'd actually been sympathetic.

"Are you sure you don't want me to go with you to visit this interesting fellow?" He held onto her arm as though he were afraid she'd slip away and be gone forever.

"No," Callie said firmly. "This is another of those things I have to do by myself, as usual. I just had to come here today ... Daddy ... and make certain that you don't mind if I sell Mother's car. I want Matt to have it, no matter what he decides about me."

"If that idiot doesn't appreciate your coming to apologize, he doesn't deserve that car."

He walked her to the curb, where he hailed a taxi. "Where are you staying?"

"At the Ravinia Hilton. I have a room on the twelfth floor, where I can see the entire Atlanta skyline. I sat there last night and watched the sun set. It was magnificent. Not as beautiful as a mountain sunset, but close."

"And you're really going to leave the valley and move back to town?"

"Yep, if a certain businessman will have me."

"Call me," Wesley said as he closed the door to the cab. "Come home if he ... I mean, I don't want you hurt, Callie. Promise me you won't close me out this time."

She smiled at him, her eyes full of promises.

Callie spent the rest of the afternoon shopping at a mall near the hotel. She selected a ruby-red silk dress that clung seductively to her body. Gossamer-sheer panties and a lacy bra made her smile as she contemplated Matt's expression when he discovered them. Sheer, flesh-colored stockings and red high heels completed her outfit.

She took a deep breath, piled her packages into the Fiesta, and hoped fervently that

she wasn't about to make a fool of herself.

Back at the hotel Callie swallowed her panic, then donned the underwear, the sheer panty hose, and finally the red dress. After she applied the first makeup she'd worn in years, she decided that she looked like a Neiman-Marcus version of a gypsy or, perhaps, Scarlett O'Hara in modern dress.

The summer sun had just set as she wheeled the Fiesta into the fashionable suburban subdivision where Matt lived. No homes were visible from the street, only numbered mailboxes without names, adorned with little metal placards that announced which security service protected each residence.

Callie drove up the driveway, grateful that the gate was open. A canopy of trees shielded the house, then the trees gave way to open space, and she saw an ornate Victorian monstrosity sitting stiffly on top of a hill.

The driveway carried Callie around behind the house past a brick, ivy-covered stable that was brightly lit. She slowed Ruby as she realized that the stable wasn't for housing horses. Instead, each stall had been enlarged to accommodate a shiny convertible. Each car was polished to perfection. The collection seemed more like artwork than modes of transportation. Over each stall was a heavy brass plate stamped in Gothic script with the year, model, and manufacturer's name for the car displayed there.

Only one space was vacant, she noticed. Callie jerked Ruby to a stop. One space with a plate that read, "1953 Fiesta, by Oldsmobile."

Callie felt a chill, as if she'd looked into a waiting grave. Ruby must have felt it, too, because for a second her engine skipped. Callie pressed down on the accelerator and drove past the stable. The scene had presented an eerie picture.

The drive led past a formal garden with gigantic shrubs that had been clipped to aesthetic perfection. Scattered among the shrubs were sculptures and, in several places, ornate little gazebos. Precise rows of hedges and carefully manicured flower beds were evenly laid out everywhere.

When she completed her circle of the house and stopped by the front door, she sat in silence and felt dread steal over her. What had made her think she could fit in here? This wasn't a home; this was a museum, a showcase for a man's possessions. Then she looked beyond the lawns and the immaculate garden and saw a chain-link enclosure, new and shiny. She gasped. William stared at her from behind the fence, his eyes full of woe.

"William, my darling!"

His answering baa was totally ecstatic. Callie scrambled from the convertible and ran to the fence. She couldn't stop the tears that stung her eyes. Matt had kidnapped poor William ruthlessly, but he'd given him royal treatment afterward. William's pen had an ornamental drinking fountain in one corner, a huge pile of sweet clover hay in the other, and a colorful canvas tent for protection from the rain.

"But he's fenced you in," she said wistfully. The thought tore at her, and anger grew from it. He knew William hated fences. Her freedom-loving, vagabond goat was now just a goat in a gilded cage. She supposed that she'd suffer the same fate, if she stayed.

"We're going home soon," she told him. "Be patient for just a little while." Callie turned, marched briskly to the front door, and rang the bell.

Seconds later the door opened, and she steeled herself, ready to give Matt a piece of her mind about fences for goats and tombs for perfectly healthy cars. But the words she was about to lash out at him with died in her throat.

He stood there, bedraggled, worn, a little lost-looking. He wasn't the slick, efficient executive who'd come to Sweet Valley to buy an antique car. He wasn't the efficient organizer who'd pestered her to be more businesslike in Helen. He wasn't the confident lover who'd plied her body with loving kisses and ardent caresses. The man standing before her was haggard and barefoot, wearing cut-off jeans and a floppy undershirt. He badly needed a shave.

"Caroline?" His whisper held disbelief. Then he began to smile, and the despair fell away from him. "Thank God. Is it really you?"

She whispered back. "Yes, Matt, it's me."

"I didn't think you'd come."

"I didn't think you were desperate enough to steal William." The disbelief in her voice was undisguised. "I can understand your wanting the Fiesta. I can understand your ... your interest in me. But William? I can't believe you'd want the car and me badly enough to endure him."

"Come in, Callie. We need to talk. Please?" He stood back, his voice pleading and uncertain.

For a moment they simply looked at each other. She didn't know what to say. A hundred times since he'd left she'd pictured this moment, and now the words wouldn't come. Matt seemed to be having the same problem.

It took every ounce of resolve he could command not to do something irrational. All he wanted was to sweep her into his arms, but he waited. The least wrong move might send her out of his life again, he feared.

"All right, Matt," she said at last, entering the shadowy entranceway. "I have something to say to you and then I'll go."

"Please, come into the study." He opened a tall, paneled door off the hallway. They stepped inside a softly lit room filled with books and paintings. "Callie," he began, "about William—"

"Yes, that's a good place to start." She turned to face him, girding herself not to reveal the desire she felt, even now. She'd expected this to be difficult, but never could she have pictured the change in the man before her.

Matt took a deep breath and tried to find the words to explain. Callie took his breath away. No, this wasn't Callie. He dimly realized that something was different about her. Her ... outfit. Her makeup.

Gone was the adorable and completely natural look. She was polished and smooth, dressed in a deep-red dress that completely covered her lovely body, yet left Matt with the feeling that she was more exposed than he'd ever seen her. Dark shadow made her eyes unbelievably exotic. Her hair was pulled up on her head in a sophisticated sweep, and her shapely legs were even more stunning, complemented by hosiery and elegant high heels. Lord, she was beautiful.

"About William," she said.

"Yes. Well, I know your soft spot for him. Goat-napping was the only tactic I could think of to bring you to my home."

"You caged him up. That's"—she squinted, and jabbed a finger at him as she used one of his favorite words—"sacrilege."

He smiled wearily. "I didn't pen him up by choice. It was self-defense. I didn't care when he ate my flowers, but the estate next door has an orchard, and William didn't understand that he wasn't welcome in it. He was overindulging in apples, and I was afraid he'd explode. I called a veterinarian, and he agreed that a pen was the smart idea."

Callie couldn't hold back a smile, and Matt couldn't stop himself from moving toward her.

"Callie..."

"No, Matt, please don't touch me. This is difficult enough without your touching me." She looked around, studying the fine old paintings, seeing the sculpture through the window behind him and the brightly lit stable behind the garden. "What I came to say to you is that I've decided to let you have Ruby. I'm going to follow the craft-show circuit with Lacey, so I won't need a car of my own. I'll leave Ruby with John Henry. Give him what you consider to be a fair price. He'll give the money to Tom Hicks for his chickens."

"What's happened to Tom's chickens?"

"They caught a virus and died. Tom's nearly bankrupt."

"You aren't leaving me, Caroline. No way. I told you before that we're going to talk, and we're going to do just that. You belong here, with me."

"You mean here in this mausoleum? I could never survive here, Matt. This ..." She turned and surveyed her surroundings painfully. "This ... would kill me."

He started toward her, his face set determinedly. Suddenly the housekeeper appeared at the door with a message from a business acquaintance of Matt's. Callie took the opportunity to leave.

She whirled around, then ran from the room. She was seated in Ruby, putting her in gear, when Matt raced out of the house.

"Caroline! Wait, dammit!" She shook her head and pressed down on the accelerator. Ruby leaped forward, but so did Matt. He flung himself into the back of the convertible as she gunned the engine and roared down his driveway. "I love you, Caroline, I love you!" he yelled. "I'll do whatever it takes to keep you with me!"

She floored the gas pedal, and the Fiesta raced along the road into a stretch of undeveloped woodland. Tears streamed down her face, tears she had wanted to cry so many times but hadn't. Matt started to climb into the front seat with her, but she shook her head violently.

"No!" she yelled. "Stay away!" He sank back, cursing.

"I don't want to be part of a collection!" she yelled into the wind. "I saw your cars tonight! They're cold and lifeless! I don't want to become like them!"

"I'll pack my bags and live in a tent, if that's what you want! Callie! I need you! I'm a changed man! I'll kiss William good night every night and eat alfalfa sprouts religiously

and help you make baskets!"

Callie lifted her foot from the gas pedal. He'd live in a tent and eat alfalfa sprouts? He was saying that he'd let her stay free. As she began to slow the car she heard a loud explosion. The Fiesta jerked to one side, and the steering wheel was wrenched from her hands. The car plunged off the road, directly into a thicket of pine trees.

"Matt! The car! Oh, the car!" Callie knew she and Matt were safe, but Ruby might very well be ruined.

"Hold on!" Matt called. He reached over the seat and gripped her by the shoulders, as if he could keep her from all harm that way.

Desperately she turned the wheel, guiding the convertible between two huge pine trees with a skill she hadn't known she possessed. Callie heard the ugly tearing sound of metal and the crunch of glass as Ruby slid to a stop, her front end buckled against a massive stump.

Silence fell. Dimly she heard her own sobs and Matt's soft curses. She shook his hands away and leaned forward, her head against the steering wheel.

"Callie, Callie!" Matt climbed over the seat and caught her urgently in his arms. "Are you hurt?" When she opened her eyes and looked up at him, he felt a shiver of relief so violent that he could only hold her against him and continue to tremble.

"Matt," she said wretchedly, "I've ruined the Fiesta."

"To hell with the Fiesta. Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not." Callie gulped for air. "I won't ever be all right without you."

She burrowed close to him, and Matt sighed happily. So she needed him as much as he needed her. Holding her, he reached over and switched off the Fiesta's engine, then slid himself and Callie across the front seat to the passenger side.

She felt so good in his arms. Nothing in his life was as important as this woman—not money, not antique-car collections, and certainly not one automobile. She'd forced him to open up when he hadn't expected to; then she'd slipped into his life and become irreplaceable.

"Callie, I don't ever intend to let you go. I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too. We've got to find a way to work everything out. I've been thinking, and trying to alter my life-style. I've been trying to decide if I could fit into your life."

"Hush ..."

"No, let me finish. I was too hard on my father, Matt. I see that now. He's not perfect, but I never gave him much chance to try. I won't make the same mistake with you. You don't have to give up anything—not your collections, not your elegant way of living, not anything. I don't want to force you to change."

"Callie, darling, people don't make other people change. They couldn't if they wanted to. I've changed because I want to make you happy. And you've changed because you don't need to run away from the past."

"But ... I fell in love with Matt the businessman, and you fell in love with Callie the free spirit. If this relationship is going to work, we'll have to compromise." She paused dramatically. "I'll give up alfalfa sprouts."

"And I'll give up my giant house. We'll get a smaller one and decorate it with your

great-grandmother's crocheted pieces and your grandmother's quilts. We'll plant apple trees. And kudzu!" He put his thumb under her chin and lifted her face, touching her nose gently with his lips.

"What about Ruby?" she asked. She brushed her lips across the corners of his mouth.

"We'll definitely keep Ruby. We'll still drive her ... but we'll fix her up and keep her in immaculate condition." He kissed her along the edges of the upswept hairdo, which was beginning to come unpinned.

"Will you be upset if I visit my cabin in Sweet Valley often?" Callie's breath grew erratic as Matt's hands began to slide beneath her dress.

"I'll visit it with you."

"And William, what about him, Matt?"

"Why do you think I want to plant apple trees at our new home? For William. And we'll buy him a harem of lady goats. They should keep him too occupied to pester anyone ever again."

His hand trailed up her leg and encountered her wispy underwear. He drew back with an expression of total disbelief.

"And I'll start wearing underwear," she promised solemnly. "All the time."

"Not on your life." He began to kiss her, and between kisses he murmured, "There's such a thing as going too far."

Surrendering herself freely to him, Callie opened her heart and felt Matt fill it to the bursting point. But she couldn't accept all the wonderful gifts he was giving her without telling him the truth.

"Matt, you have to know something—"

"I know I'll love you forever."

"But will you love the child we're going to have?"

He pulled back abruptly, his eyes wide and unreadable as he searched her upturned face. "You do want our child, don't you?" she whispered in a hoarse voice. "I'm sorry to tell you the news this way ... but you have to know before you make any more commitments." When he continued to watch her in silence she clutched his shoulders fearfully. "I can't give up the baby, Matthew, even if it was unplanned...."

"A baby," he said numbly. Then he smiled. "We're going to have a baby." His smile grew wider. "Our very own limited-edition collectible." He threw his head back and whooped. When he looked at her again, tears glistened in his eyes. "If it's a girl, let's name her Ruby. If it's a boy, let's name him John Henry."

Callie almost cried with happiness. She grasped his dear face between her hands and smiled up at him. "It was John Henry, after all, who started this trouble," she told him.

Matt grinned. His voice was soft as he bent to kiss her. "You mean this kind of trouble, Caroline?"

Her own voice sank to a barely audible level as his mouth hovered over hers. "Oh, yes. Just like this." They kissed deeply, and when they finished she gave him a coy look. "I've always wanted to make love in a convertible, beneath a summer sky, Matt." Callie slid out of his arms and lay back on the seat, then held out her hands.

"A new adventure," he said with a dramatic sigh as he lowered himself on top of her.

"How will I ever survive?"

"Through rigorous training," she replied. He began to undress her very slowly.

"Caroline Carmichael, I can see now that you're going to widen my horizons."

"You've widened mine." She slid a hand between them and patted her stomach. His hand followed.

"I can already feel the baby kicking."

"I'm only two months pregnant, darling. It's not possible."

Matt gave her a smug look, but his eyes gleamed with laughter. "If this baby has inherited any of your independent spirit, it already wants to be free."

Callie shook her head. Her hands moved languidly over his thighs. "Freedom can be awfully lonely." They shared a long, tender gaze. "Love me now, Matt, please."

He smiled. And he did.

And many minutes later, as they lay in each other's arms, they heard a strange, soft sound nearby in the woods. "I think there's a little creek around here," Matt whispered. "The wind is carrying the noise of the water running over the rocks. Sounds like someone is chuckling, doesn't it?"

"Yes. What a nice thought." Callie brushed a kiss across Matt's cheek and suppressed a smile.

She knew they'd just heard the low, approving baa of a shaggy angora goat.

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

Welcome to Loveswept!

The holidays are approaching and I've so many things to do, don't you? So why is it *all* I want to do is cuddle up on the couch with a good book? I'll tell you why, there are so many amazing *Loveswept* stories on sale this month that all you'll want to do is read too!! For starters, **LOVING THE EARL** (11/11) by Sharon Cullen features our hero's sister from **THE NOTORIOUS LADY ANNE** (2/11), and OMG ladies, this book is for you! Sharon writes with wit and steam a combination that keeps me reading all night long. Double your historical delight with Samantha Kane's finale in *The Saint's Devils*, **DEVIL IN MY ARMS** (11/26) – its Hil's story and what a match he's made. Then, *Loveswept* debut, Serena Bell releases, **YOURS TO KEEP** (11/11), a captivating story of a woman living on the edge—and the man who's destined to love her (*sigh*).

And there's more!

Ruthie Knox releases a series of short stories, **Roman Holiday**. Over the next weeks look for each installment: **CHAINED** (11/12) - book one launches the series; followed by, **HITCHED** (11/19); then, **BLINDSIDED** (11/26), plus books four and five are right around the corner, ten books in all!!

And, you can't miss these classics:

Fran Baker's, **THE WIDOW AND THE WILDCATTER**, the captivating story of a woman haunted by the ghosts of the past, and a daredevil who promises a future filled with love; Sandra Chastain's, **REBEL IN SILK**, about an unconventional beauty who refuses to back down from a challenge—or a handsome loner with a taste for trouble; and Sandra's classics continue with, **TOO HOT TO HANDLE**, and, **THE SILVER BULLET AFFAIR**. Look for favorite *Loveswept* author Iris Johansen and her re-release of, **STAR-SPANGLED BRIDE**. Readers have continued to adore Ruth Owen's *Loveswepts* including, **SORCERER**, a sexy tale of an emotionally guarded computer whiz and the princess who makes virtual reality come to vivid life. And, to wrap up the month Jean Stone's, **BIRTHDAY GIRL**, and Connie Brockway's, **AS YOU DESIRE**, will keep you toasty on those cold winter nights.

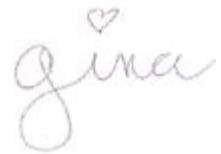
Holiday lovers won't want to skip these contemporary reissues, **ROOM AT THE INN** by Ruthie Knox, and Molly O'Keefe's, **ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS**, guaranteed to put you in the holiday spirit.

New this winter is, **HEATING UP THE HOLIDAY'S**, a fabulous anthology that takes you through the seasons: *New York Times* bestselling author, Lisa Renee Jones, leads the lineup with, **PLAY WITH ME**, a Thanksgiving romance; **SNOWFALL**, by Mary Ann Rivers, will warm you up for Christmas; and knock off your New Years with, **MIDIGHT**

AFFAIR, by Serena Bell – love could not be any more special!

Be swept away with *Love swept*, 'tis the season!

Happy Holidays –

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Gina". A small heart shape is drawn above the letter "i".

Gina Wachtel
Associate Publisher

Read on for excerpts from more *Loveswept* titles ...

Read on for an excerpt from Katie Rose's

Mistletoe and Magic

Chapter One

New York, 1874

"I see someone," Jennifer Appleton whispered. Her half-shut eyes fell on the elderly woman seated across the table from her. "It is a woman. Has your mother passed over as well as your father?"

"Why, yes!" Beatrice Osborne appeared surprised as she gazed at the lovely young woman before her. "He died in the war, while she ..."

"Her heart." Jennifer nodded as the woman gasped in acknowledgment. "I have a strange feeling right here." She pressed her hand over her left breast and appeared to shudder. "I feel she really left us due to a broken heart."

"She was never the same after seeing my father's name on those papers." Beatrice's eyes filled. "And though they said she had a weakness due to the fever, I believe as you do."

"The war took many widows as well as husbands," Jennifer said. "Did she wear a cameo?"

"All the time!" The old woman pulled a chain from beneath her collar and displayed a beautifully carved pearl silhouette on a black stone. "This was hers. I can still smell her perfume!"

"She knows that you wear it and think of her. I can see your father now. They are together on the other side. Know that they are happy and at peace. They will be there for you one day."

As if on cue, a harpsichord wailed somewhere in the old house, and a ghostly sound emanated from the walls. The chandelier trembled overhead, throwing dancing prisms of light about the room.

"Your father wants you to know that he loves you, too ..." Jennifer intoned.

The music faded away, and Beatrice rose and hugged her as Penelope and Winifred entered with refreshments. "It was my parents!" She turned to the beautiful Appleton sisters, beaming with pleasure. "They were here, and I've missed them so badly! How can I ever thank you!" She pressed a sealed envelope discreetly into Jennifer's hands.

"I am glad," Jennifer said, as Winifred and Penelope bestowed benevolent smiles on the wealthy widow. "We know what it's like to miss your loved ones. I am very pleased we brought you a measure of comfort."

Beatrice disappeared through the door and the three sisters hugged each other in congratulations. "You were wonderful, Winifred!" Jennifer cried. "I swear I can still hear the music! And Penelope, when you jiggled the chandelier, I thought I was seeing ghosts! But how did you know about the cameo?"

"I saw it beneath her blouse," Penelope explained with a shrug. "It wasn't hard to guess the rest ..."

Winifred gave her a shrewd look, but Jennifer merely laughed and collapsed in exhaustion. "It worked beautifully. By the time we're done, I will have enough to pay for Winnie's law books, and a gown for your debut ..." Since Winifred couldn't be a practicing attorney, she

worked with Charles Howe and assisted him in his cases.

* * *

Penelope slowly opened her eyes and saw the bright gaslights of the dressing room. It was only a memory, a vision of what had happened just a few years ago when she and her sisters were practicing spiritualism for wealthy widows in New York.

It was clever Jennifer who'd come up with the scheme when they were orphaned at a young age. Their aunt, Eve Appleton, had taken them in when their parents died. Although she was generous, she was far from rich, and Jennifer realized they would have to find a way to earn some much-needed money. Thankfully, spiritualism was all the rage, and the three pretty young sisters soon attracted a moneyed following.

The ironic part of their notorious past was that she, Penelope Appleton, had a secret: ever since she was a child, she could truly see the future.

She had never told anyone, and had gone along with the charade when Jennifer pretended to summon ghosts from the grave. If on occasion she imparted a suggestion to her sister, it was simply considered a lucky guess. Clever Jennifer and brilliant Winnie had always thought of her as the pretty one, a girl who used her looks to enchant men and women alike, and who hadn't another thought in her head except what she would wear tomorrow or how to use the curling tongs on her bangs to create a charming fringe. Yet if she concentrated deeply, got rid of the chatter inside her head, and really focused, she could close her eyes and see what was to come.

When she'd met Mary Forester, she intuited that her son was Jennifer's future husband. And she saw the same thing with Charles Howe in regard to her other sister, long before he and Winifred were even friends. Although neither courtship was without difficulty, Penelope was always sure deep down that these men were destined for her sisters, and that they would be supremely happy.

Now that her sisters were wed, they had given up séances, and Penelope had kept her secret to herself. But now it was her turn. On Saturday night at the Vanderbilts' Christmas ball, she would meet her one true love.

She had already seen it.

"Stop fussing, my dear, and please turn around so I can fasten your bustle."

Penelope broke out of her thoughts and managed a smile for the seamstress. Martha Winspear, New York's most fashionable dressmaker, gathered up the satin and began draping the fabric, meticulously inserting one pin after another into the folds. Finished, she sat back on her heels and nodded with satisfaction.

"There now. Turn around and see if that doesn't look grand!"

Penelope whirled to face the mirror, and then gasped with delight when she saw her new dress. Simple and elegant, the ivory satin ball gown dipped scandalously low in the bodice, only to pause at a black velvet belt, which encircled an impossibly slender waist. The rich fabric then molded to her hips in a daring mermaid silhouette before flouncing to the floor in a charming cascade of ruffles.

"Martha, it's gorgeous!" Penelope said with pleasure. "You've outdone yourself. Why,

you will be the talk of the town after the Vanderbilts' Christmas ball, I will see to it!"

The seamstress beamed as she peered at the woman before her. She couldn't wish for a better model to showcase her work, for Penelope was truly beautiful. Martha's head cocked shrewdly as she took in the young woman's perfect features, the soft blond hair that was the color of pure sunlight, and the rosebud mouth. But it was her eyes that bedazzled even the most casual passerby: violet blue, like the depths of a fairy pool, Penelope Appleton's gaze made one feel enchanted.

And there was no lack of funds to pay for the dress, Martha thought in approval. The older Appleton sisters had married well, so Penelope could afford any gown of her choosing to make her long-awaited debut.

Looking critically at the garment once more, Martha smoothed a ruffle. "That is very kind, my dear. You will turn every other girl green with envy. And why not? You are the most beautiful of the famous Appleton sisters, after all! Come now, put on your gloves and your earbobs, and let's go show the ladies!"

Penelope grinned in excitement and, still holding her dress aloft, rushed out to the parlor where Jennifer and Winifred waited with their aunt Eve. The dressmaker dramatically turned up the gaslights as Penelope stepped out from behind a curtain onto the stage.

Three gasps sounded at once as the sisters rose in unison, while Eve fumbled in her pocket for her lace handkerchief.

"Why, Pen, you are stunning!" Jennifer cried, a toddler on her knee. Scholarly Winifred removed her glasses to polish them on her sleeve, and then peered through the spectacles once more with approval. Aunt Eve dabbed at her eyes, choking back tears before coming to stand before her niece, her face full of emotion.

"You are radiant, my dear! Your parents would have been so proud! Who else would have thought of putting a black velvet ribbon at the waist but you! You were always so clever! Your mother often talked about your debut and the plans she had for all of you. And now with two of you well married," she glanced at Jennifer and Winifred approvingly, "that only leaves our Penny. I wish your mother could be with us here today!"

"I feel she is," Penelope whispered, glancing into the mirror with an odd look. "I know she is," she repeated more firmly.

The sisters were silent for a moment, thinking of their parents who had passed several years ago. It was Jennifer who looked up first, gave her sister a grin, and indicated the lovely gown. "I want to hug you, but I'm afraid to wrinkle that dress!"

"Pooh." Penelope whirled around and opened her arms to embrace them all. This time their tears flowed freely. Eve cried daintily into her linen cloth, careful not to wet the gown, Jennifer choked, and Winifred sniffled.

They made a charming picture. Jennifer, her dark blond hair pulled back into a loose chignon and her mischievous gray eyes brimming with tears, looked as proud as any doting mother. Winifred's severe bun and restrained dress only emphasized her elegant features, which were filled with affection for her younger sister. And Aunt Eve, plump and pretty in her blue morning dress with her sugar-spun hair gleaming in the

lamplight, looked like a fairy godmother.

Even the dressmaker joined in the emotional storm, wailing loudly before blowing her nose into her handkerchief with a snort that startled the other women into laughter.

"There, there, now, we must be careful of the pins!" Martha, realizing the danger to her creation, wedged herself in the middle of the fray. "You can change now, dear. I'll stitch this up today and be ready to press it tomorrow. Saturday evening, mark my words, you will be the belle of the ball! And then I will be designing your wedding gown!"

Penelope giggled and reluctantly released her sisters, and then turned around so that the dressmaker could unbutton her ball gown. "I know! I mean," she corrected, "I hope so!"

* * *

The Vanderbilts' Christmas ball was a much-anticipated event of the season. Young Alva Vanderbilt and her husband, William, were newlyweds, and they opened their house to celebrate their own happiness as well as to extend their hospitality to their friends and neighbors.

The townhouse was gaily decorated with sprigs of holly and wreaths of laurel, while tiny bouquets of mistletoe nestled above in the kissing boughs. Gilt banisters lining the staircase were festooned with evergreens and bright red ribbons, giving them the appearance of candy canes. Chandeliers dripping with crystals lent a sparkling light to the festivities as servants crossed the black-and-white marble floor carrying silver trays of Champagne and tempting ices and cakes to refresh the guests.

"You all look so handsome!" Eve cried as she stood in the foyer with Penelope. Jennifer and Winifred handed their fur-trimmed cloaks to a servant, while their husbands, Gabriel and Charles, dispensed with their top hats and walking sticks. Jennifer, in a sumptuous ruby-colored gown, appeared festive and lovely, while Winifred was the picture of grace in emerald-green velvet.

The sergeant at arms gestured to Winifred and Jennifer, and then turned to the crowd.

"May I present Mr. and Mrs. Forester, Mr. and Mrs. Howe!"

The company applauded, acknowledging the couples. Jennifer and Winifred descended the stairs with their husbands while nodding to acquaintances. The women joined some friends near the fire, while Gabriel and Charles fetched drinks from a passing waiter.

"Jared!" Charles Howe shook the hand of his friend as he approached. "I was wondering where you were, old chap!"

Jared Marton laughed. Clad in a black suit with a white waistcoat, he looked every inch the successful dashing attorney that he was. Accepting a glass of Champagne, he took Winifred's hand and kissed it, ignoring the sharp look his friend sent him.

"I wasn't looking forward to this, I assure you." He raised his head with a grin. "Debutantes and dances are not to my taste. My parents insisted I attend."

"You are thirty-four," Charles said dryly, "and won't live forever. Perhaps it's time you took an interest in one of our young ladies. There are many pretty girls in need of a partner."

"You are with the most beautiful woman here, and alas, she's taken. But perhaps Mrs. Howe will generously allow me a waltz?" He gave her a wicked grin.

Winifred laughed. "I would be happy to dance, Mr. Marton. But you are acquainted with my sister Penelope? I believe they are announcing her now."

"Madame Eve Appleton ..." The deep male voice resonated, breaking through the chatter. "And making her debut this evening, her niece Miss Penelope Appleton!"

A hush seemed to fall over the room as Penelope stepped forward. She was unearthly beautiful, poised on the marble landing beneath the twinkling lights, and more than one man looked to the heavens as he beheld her. The ivory satin gown gave her the appearance of a Christmas angel amid the darker velvets of the season. A string of simple pearls adorned her throat, and tiny diamonds added sparkle to a face that needed no embellishment. Her blond hair, gleaming in the chandelier light, was tied back with a black band that matched the one at her waist, letting her curls fall artfully around her cheekbones. Demurely, she held a nosegay of white roses and baby's breath, while her dance card fluttered in enticing invitation from her gloved wrist. When she began to descend the stairs, the applause was thunderous.

"My God," Jared breathed. Dumbstruck, he could do nothing for several seconds but gawk at the gorgeous creature before him as she walked gracefully down the stairs and was immediately thronged by men. He had met Penelope in the past, and like all men, had admired her beauty, but he'd merely thought of her as Winnie's baby sister. Yet now, all grown up, dressed in a gown that could have come from Paris, she looked like Aphrodite herself.

Desire, hot and urgent, throbbed in his blood, but what he felt was more than simply appreciation for her looks. He wanted her, all of her, totally and completely. It didn't matter that she was ridiculously young. It didn't matter that she was the sister of his good friend Winifred. It didn't matter that he would have tons of competition for the fabled beauty, or that she was notorious, being an Appleton. Nothing mattered except that he make her his own, regardless of the cost.

"Jared?" Winifred lightly touched his arm. "Are you all right?"

"I think your baby sister has made another conquest," Charles joked as Jared shook his head, as if trying to rid his brain of an enchantment. "You'd better get in there if you hope to secure a dance," he advised his fellow lawyer. "She's surrounded by beaux. I wouldn't be surprised if her card was already full."

"We'll see about that." Purposefully, Jared rebuttoned his glove and squared his shoulders, as if preparing for battle. He didn't care if it was one swain or a thousand—this night would not pass without him securing a dance. He strode purposefully through the crowd, directly toward the girl who was causing such a stir, ignoring the comments and inquiries all around him like the buzz of a thousand hornets. Penelope Appleton had certainly made an impact on the staid New York society.

And on him.

* * *

Penelope's lips parted in shock and she paused as she saw a man approaching, parting the sea of black coats like a knight charging into battle. Neville Johnston was entreating her to taste a sugared plum, but she couldn't even move to respond. *It was him.* Their eyes locked, and neither one of them could look away. Her heart beat so loudly that she wondered if others could hear it, and she had to force herself to take another breath as the heady emotion flooded through her.

It was *him*. Jared Marton was the dark-haired stranger in her dreams! Penelope knew it instantly. Why had she never noticed how handsome he was, that his eyes were a compelling deep green, his chin firm and square, his mouth a sensual promise? He really was a magnificent specimen of a man, she mused, even though he was known as a rogue and one of New York's most eligible bachelors. Wealthy to boot, he was popular with the ladies, though he seemed to have no intention of settling down with just one. He enjoyed women, had a zest for life, and was used to having his own way.

This man was her destiny.

She couldn't stop the shiver of excitement that raced through her.

Read on for an excerpt from Stacey Kennedy's

Claimed

Chapter One

“Master Dmitri doesn’t expect sex.” Cora grunted. “You’ll keep your clothes on.”

Presley Flynn scanned the foyer of the snazzy mansion and looked for something to hold on to as her roommate, Cora Adams, hustled her down the corridor. With a little shove, Cora added, “You wanted this, remember?”

“Clearly, I’ve lost my damn mind.” Presley pushed back against Cora’s hands, trying to hold her ground.

The mansion was pleasant, with thick dark wood on the trim of the doorways and gentle burgundy-painted walls, but it did nothing to settle her nerves. Beneath her feet, located in the basement, was the elite BDSM dungeon, Club Sin. “Maybe I need to go to a therapist. Or skip that part and go straight to the nuthouse.”

Cora stepped in front of Presley, and her big blue eyes, lined with dark makeup, sparkled. Her long chocolate-colored hair fell over her black blouse, and her red lipstick covered pursed lips. “You told me you wanted to join the dungeon.”

Presley snorted. “You said I was a long-lost submissive who needed the lifestyle. Which, apparently, is so far from the truth, since why am I on the verge of puking all over this fancy hardwood floor?”

Cora smirked. “Please don’t puke on Master Dmitri’s floor.”

“Okay, great,” Presley muttered in total agreement. “See, it’s best I leave.”

She turned to get the hell out of the place when Cora grabbed her arm, pulling Presley back in front of her. “One chance, Presley, that’s all you get. If you leave now, you won’t be allowed to come back.”

Cora walked forward, and Presley found herself matching her stride. They passed a grand wooden staircase on the left, leading to the upstairs. A huge wrought-iron balcony curved around the entire upper floor, which led to numerous doors used for God knew what.

They strode by an oval-shaped dining room, and Cora added, “There’s a reason why you read so many BDSM erotic novels. There’s a reason why it turns you on. And there’s a reason why you made the decision to come with me tonight.”

Stopping near the doorway to the office that Presley had been avoiding for the last five minutes, she inhaled. “You’re right. I did come here for a reason.” To surrender to her every desire. “I don’t want to walk out the front door, but—” She pointed toward the office. “I’m scared shitless to walk through that door.”

“Of course you are.” Cora grinned. “Your darkest, most secret fantasies await you in that office.” Without another word, she spun on her heel and headed down the hallway in the opposite direction.

“Do you plan on coming in?”

Presley started at the powerful low voice that seemed to draw her forward, giving the fearful butterflies in her stomach a flutter of excitement. Her feet moved without

thought as she entered the office, which looked much like a library.

Books filled the shelves at the far end of the room, along with a grand wooden desk. A computer and telephone and other office accessories sat on top of it. A sleek black leather couch was situated straight ahead, under the bay window.

"Ah, she finally decides to enter."

Presley froze, as time halted. The man never raised his head to look at her, but he didn't need to. His presence filled the room, making her entirely aware of him. He sat at the desk, his head bowed toward the paper he'd been reading. With the slight curve to his mouth, he stole the air from her lungs. He was hot.

As the owner of Club Sin and the president of Las Vegas's top casino, Dmitri Pratt matched the mansion with his wealthy exuberance. Hard angles defined his jawline and cheekbones. His lips were lush and sculpted and his nose straight-edged. The sleeves of his black dress shirt were rolled up on his muscular forearms, displaying a tribal dragon tattoo on his left arm.

When she didn't move, Dmitri stated, with his eyes still focused on the paper, "Take a seat on the couch."

Exhaling slowly, she shed the tension in her chest as she made her way to the leather sofa and sat down. The coolness of the upholstery against her heated skin came as much needed relief. She crossed her legs, doing her best to portray confidence.

In front of this powerful and experienced man, she didn't want to show her apprehension. In fact, she'd never been *this* uncomfortable around men, but Dmitri wasn't simply a man. He sexually dominated women, and as a Dom, he did the kinky things Presley had only dreamed of fulfilling.

He signed the paper, then he lifted his head. Presley forgot the world around her, absorbed in him. His piercing blue eyes gazed over her from head to toe before his focus returned to her face. The depth of those eyes pulled her in with the intensity of how he watched her. No, how he *studied* her. He didn't give her a quick look but a long examination.

Under his stare, her body went mushy and *hot*. Flames flickered through her veins as he stood from his chair and approached. Her fingernails bit into her palms as her heart rate increased. His muscular frame didn't fit his fluid gait. Each step he took exuded authority, like a lion on a hunt, but appeared graceful, with controlled power.

She scanned the thickness of his shoulders beneath his black dress shirt, and she noticed how the fabric clung to him, detailing the valleys of his muscles. Glancing lower, she found the rest of him to be more of the same—powerful and masculine. His black slacks, held tight by a leather belt hung low on his hips, hugged his thick thighs.

Stopping in front of her, he stared at her with impressively intense eyes, and a strand of his stylish blond hair hung across his forehead. "So, you're Cora's friend? Presley, right?"

The commanding nature of his voice made her breathing erratic. This man had the capability of making her feel giddy as a schoolgirl, as if he were her secret crush who'd noticed her at last.

"Yes, that's me."

Dmitri's mouth twitched, and he tucked a finger under her jaw, tilting up her chin. "Welcome to my home, Presley."

She shivered at the stern yet gentle hold. "Thank you."

He slid a finger along her jawline, cocking his head, and his study of her touched the center of her soul, awakening her body in a foreign way. As if, for the first time in her life, a man looked at her and truly saw her. His examination made her bare, totally exposed to him, and unusually vulnerable.

Locked in a stare she couldn't break free from, she wiggled in her seat, unable to stop herself, then she froze. After another shift, she couldn't ignore the damp silk between her thighs. How was that even possible—nervous one minute to undeniably turned on the next?

Dmitri's eyebrow arched, and that sexy smile returned. "Pretty little thing, aren't you, doll?"

He removed his hold and she quivered, and her body hummed with desire. The memory of his touch remained. The path his finger had taken was scorched into her skin, and the heat within only intensified as she drew in his masculine scent, edged with sandalwood.

Watching the twinkle in his eyes increase, she cursed herself for being entirely too obvious. Or maybe she should curse him for being so talented at reading people. To calm down, she glanced around the office, looking for something to take her mind off of her response to him.

It was hopeless.

The home seemed like a fairy tale all in itself. Along the dark taupe wall across from her were four huge canvases forming a solid picture of a lone tree and a moon, reminding her that she was out of her element. "That painting is beautiful." *Enormous and expensive.* "Did you pick it out?"

Dmitri followed her gaze for only a moment. "Do I look like the type of man who'd know about art?"

She licked her dry lips, staring at his sculpted mouth that held the mysterious smile, and she admitted, "Kind of."

"No, doll, I couldn't care less about it." He winked. "That's what interior decorators are for."

Dmitri deftly turned and strode toward the watercooler in the corner of the office. Presley frowned at his back. Perhaps she had misread him and he wasn't as fancy as she'd thought, since he seemed amused by her response.

After filling a tall glass with water, he returned to her and offered her the glass. "Here, drink this, love."

"Thanks." She accepted the glass, and settled the cool glass on her lap, not sure she'd get the water down her dry throat.

Dmitri leaned in and gazed into her eyes dead-on. "I didn't give you the glass to hold. I gave you the water because you need it. Drink up, Presley."

The stern set of his jaw indicated he wouldn't relent, so with a shrug, she sipped the water. The cool liquid rushed through her mouth and down her throat, easing the

tightness as she swallowed. Maybe she needed that more than she'd thought. He gave a firm nod. "Better."

As he sat next to her on the couch, his thick thigh brushed against hers, and a spark blasted through her, causing her cheeks to warm. The side of his mouth once again curved as he stared at her blush before those intense eyes zeroed in on hers. "Now, then, tell me a bit about yourself."

"Well—" She focused on their conversation and away from how incredible his body felt against hers. "My parents are still together and have a good marriage. I grew up in Apple Valley my entire life, but I moved to Vegas about four months ago to live with my ex." She took another sip of the water and realized she'd almost opened a door she didn't want to go through. Gathering her thoughts, she looked at her hands, clenched around the glass, and continued. "That's a story not worth repeating." No way in hell would she tell him about her ex-boyfriend, Steven Moser, on whom she wasted eight years of her life. "Let's see ... I'm twenty-five and have no kids."

Dmitri raised his ankle over his knee, drawing her focus to him, and she noticed his body shaking in silent laughter. Maybe, with Steven on her mind, her defenses were already on high alert. Or perhaps Dmitri made her feel way too inexperienced and even too nervous in this erotic adventure she'd entered, but her glare came fierce and instant.

He frowned. "Would you like to try that again?"

"I have nothing else to say." She shifted against the couch, realizing now that she deserved his mirth. In this place, she might as well have a halo over her head. "That's all there is to know about me."

"No, Presley." His eyes were dark, firm, and cold. "In my house, my guests don't glare at me."

Had he honestly noticed her glare? Most times when she glared at Steven, he didn't see it or didn't care enough to ask what had upset her. "I—"

Dmitri's eyes narrowed. "If I've upset you, tell me, so I can address it. Don't give me nasty looks that I don't deserve, considering I've hardly said a word."

The authority in his voice made her insides quiver. It was the meaning in his statement that spoke to something deep inside her—*I see you*. Even if what she'd done bothered him, he didn't overlook any of her actions. For the first time in a long time—possibly ever—she wasn't a shadow, a person everyone passed and never truly looked at, and that made her speechless.

However, at his firm look urging her to continue, she took his advice and asked, "What did you find so funny?"

He dropped his ankle from his knee and turned to face her. "Your little rundown there." His stern expression melted away to a charming smile, drawing her full attention to his kissable mouth. "I didn't mean for you to tell me everything about yourself, as if I were hiring you."

Just kill me now!

His eyes softened, as did his voice. "I meant for you to tell me why you want to join the dungeon, considering you look incredibly nervous."

She almost rolled her eyes but stopped herself. "Right, I guess that's what you'd want

to know.” Shoving her embarrassment away to fret over later, she put on a brave face and lifted her chin. “Well, I read a lot of erotic romance books and … um … Cora has told me about the lifestyle, and you see, it …”

With a gentle hold, he gripped her chin, tilting her head downward. “Arouses you?”

He dropped his hand and she nodded, and the water in the glass rippled in waves from the tremble of her hands. Gripping it tightly, she bit her lip, which didn’t ease the flickers of mortified tremors.

“What about BDSM arouses you?”

His intense study reached into her soul. She squirmed against the leather couch, and her skin flushed wicked hot. “Err … the sex stuff.”

One sleek eyebrow lifted. “The sex stuff?”

She followed the line of his brow along the masculine contours of his face. While his eyebrow arch looked simple enough, it portrayed a statement of curiosity, and he was beautiful. “You know, being tied up, dominated … and um … other stuff.”

Dmitri considered her in a way that made her feel as if he noticed every flaw on her face. “I’m going to be blunt with you, Presley.” Before she could inquire what he meant by *blunt*, he added, “I’d appreciate if you stay quiet while I talk. After I’m done, we can discuss what I’ve told you.” He waited for her nod, then he continued. “A Club Sin submissive can be restrained with ropes, cuffs, chains, or anything that can be used to bind a person.” His grin became devilish. “Doms enjoy being creative.”

Sweet Jesus!

“In a scene, you might be flogged, paddled, whipped, spanked, or caned. You could find yourself tied to a Saint Andrew’s cross, tossed over a spanking bench, or attached to any other device located in the dungeon.”

Damn her body for flushing at those choices, and damn his wicked expression declaring enjoyment. She took a big gulp of the water, which this time didn’t help the dryness in her throat.

His eyes twinkled. “If it’s within your limits, you might have intercourse in the dungeon or be asked to give oral sex; if your Dom is especially pleased, you could find yourself climaxing in front of a crowd.”

Her mouth dropped open, but he seemed not to realize or care. He added, “This isn’t a sex club meant to have vanilla sex. At Club Sin, you are the submissive and are treated as such.” Drawing in a deep breath, he allowed her a minute to process before he said, “There are no slaves at Club Sin. We have submissives who, outside of the dungeon, are equal in every regard. In the dungeon, you are the bottom in the relationship and will need to accept that. You don’t make decisions. You don’t ask questions. You do what your Dom tells you to do.”

A shiver slid down her spine. Not at what he said, exactly, but how he said it. The heated look in his eye and the stern tone portrayed a confidence that her lower half appreciated. Which had been part of the battle, excitement at the thought of a man controlling her, yet she’d been raised to have a voice and thoughts. Meshing the two desires and wants was confusing at best.

His head tilted. “Submissives at Club Sin are expected to be submissive only while in a

scene. Meaning you're not expected to be in high protocol at all times in the dungeon, as in kneeling at your Dom's feet and avoiding eye contact. These are the rules I've put in place at Club Sin, because they're what I prefer. To be a member, everyone must follow that rule."

He once again let her process it all before he said, "Of course, you are to respect all Doms with proper address; mind your manners; and be respectful to other submissives. But we are not a club that expects high protocol, unless that's something your Dom requires of you for a punishment." That ridiculously sexy eyebrow arched again. "Do you understand?"

Presley nodded and wiggled in her seat, trying to ignore the heat swirling between her thighs. All of what he said were things she'd read about, fantasized over, and the idea that she'd play the submissive role made her burn.

"Some submissives like things others don't, and that's why *you* outline your limits when you sign the dungeon's agreement. That part of play at Club Sin is nonnegotiable. Your limits will never be broken. If you want to change a limit, you'll have a sit-down with me to discuss it. I may agree without hesitation, or I might request that I watch you in scene first if the limit change is drastic." He casually picked a piece of lint off his pants. "What you do in your private life is your business. Here, in the dungeon, what you do is my business, since I'm the owner of Club Sin. All clear?"

She nodded, managing to close her parted lips, but she was unable to look away from his eyes. There, in their depths, she found something so intoxicating, so centered. Dmitri appeared to be the most put-together man she'd ever met in her life, so sure of himself and his choices, and that was even sexier than his muscular frame and gorgeous face.

He flicked the piece of lint onto the floor. "If you don't follow what has been asked of you, you will be punished. If you refuse your punishment, you will be escorted from the dungeon and not allowed to return."

Her breath became trapped in her throat, and as if he read her concern, he added, "A punishment can be a spanking with a hand or a paddle, a night spent wearing a gag, or whatever the Dom thinks is appropriate for your disobedience. But no punishment would ever exceed your limits. One thing you can count on is your punishment will be fair." He tucked her hair behind her ear, smiling gently. "Now tell me how you feel about what I've told you."

"It's ... well ... I ..." She swallowed, shifting through all the confusion coursing through her veins. Her body burned so hot that she wanted out of her skin. Her mind warned her how insane it was to agree to something that could, in fact, lead to a punishment.

After a moment, she realized the winner of the internal battle was glaringly obvious, because it was why she'd come here tonight. "God forgive me, I liked it."

Dmitri gave her a long look before he threw his head back with laughter. Her embarrassment quickly turned to anger, and she stood so fast that the water spilled on the floor. "Stop laughing at me! This isn't funny."

He slowly looked at her. His eyes had darkened. He rose to his feet with a powerful grace, taking the glass from her hands, and slamming it on the end table with a *clunk*.

“To your knees.”

In a swift move, she dropped to her knees, cringing when she connected with the hardwood floor. The second the pain eased, she realized what he’d asked and what she’d done.

Had she honestly responded to Dmitri without a single thought? Was she seriously kneeling for the man at his feet? And why had he told her to kneel? Because she snapped at him, or maybe she’d glared again? Her mind raced to understand what had happened in the last couple of seconds, but failed miserably.

Dmitri’s shiny black shoes rested in front of her, and his rich masculine scent wrapped around her. He didn’t move, nor did he say a word.

She did the only thing she thought would be appropriate in this extremely awkward moment. She whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Read on for an excerpt from Lauren Layne's

After the Kiss

Chapter One

Julie Greene had built a career out of falling in love. Staying in love? Not so much.

Julie's boss apparently hadn't gotten the memo.

"I'm confused," Julie said slowly, leaning forward with a placating smile. "You want me to write what?"

Translation: You're confused. I don't write that shit.

Camille Bishop leaned back in her chair and studied Julie with puzzled eyes. "I'd have thought you'd be jumping at the chance to have such a simple assignment after last month."

Julie pursed her lips together and considered. Last month's assignment *had* been exhausting. Documenting the seven kinds of first kisses had required a lot of research.

Pleasant research.

But this? A two-page spread, to be called "How to Take Relationships to the Next Level"?

What was Camille thinking? This was *Stiletto* magazine, not Dr. Phil. *Stiletto* was sex and high heels, not companionship and freaking clogs.

The rocky post-honeymoon period just wasn't Julie's scene. Which is not to say she didn't have plenty of other skills.

The first date? She had men begging for it.

The first kiss? An art form she'd long since mastered.

The first time you lost your panties in his sheets? Soooo not a problem.

This wasn't to say that Julie had perfected only the major, most obvious dating milestones, however. She also knew how to finesse the subtler moments—those key moments where the breath caught and you thought, *Yes, this*. Julie could explain every single nuance, from the toe-curling euphoria when his hand brushed yours to the tingle when eyes held for just a beat too long. And then there was her personal favorite moment: the bone-deep satisfaction when you made him laugh for the first time—a *real* laugh.

Most women thought these moments just happened. Julie Greene knew better. These moments were created.

As for what happened *after* all that good stuff?

Julie couldn't care less. She had no need for the first fight, no desire to meet the parents. No interest in finding dirty boxers in her hamper or making room in her bathroom for a man's razor. That was all a one-way trip to Julie's personal vision of hell: couples movie night.

Julie had found that the women of New York City erroneously used movie night as a yardstick of how close to the altar he was. After all, if he was satisfied to spend a Friday night at home instead of at a strip club, he must be whipped, right?

Wrong. So wrong.

Movie night was just another way of saying that you didn't want to bother dressing up for him and that he didn't care. Julie lived in fear of the moment when fancy dinners and cocktail parties would be a thing of the past, and the highlight of the weekend would be lounging in yoga pants and watching car chases or beautiful people making out on-screen.

The sexiest part of *that* scenario was the butter on the popcorn.

She shuddered. Julie Greene didn't do movie night.

"Camille, look," she tried again. "It's not that I don't respect your suggestions ..."

"Oh?" Camille tilted her head, making her chemically straightened bob sway ever so slightly, and Julie froze. Over the years, Julie had come to think of Camille's usually immobile hair as her "tell"—when it moved, someone's life was about to get really messy.

Up until now, it had never been Julie's life.

In the six years that she'd been working for Camille as a full-time columnist, this was the first time Julie had received a direct order on a story topic. Even when Julie had been fresh out of college with nothing but a handful of internships under her belt, Camille had given her wide latitude on what to write about.

Julie knew that Camille trusted her judgment. So what was with the sudden power trip?

It didn't make sense. Julie was one of *Stiletto*'s best columnists, and they both knew it. And Camille had always encouraged her writers to play to their strengths. Julie's niche was the single readers with the dream of falling in love. After that, they were on their own.

Julie sat up straighter. Wait, no. That wasn't entirely true. Readers *did* have someplace to go once they got past the fun part of dating.

Grace Brighton.

"Why not have Grace do it?" Julie asked excitedly. "She's your relationship guru."

"And here I thought you and Grace were *both* my relationship gurus."

"We are," Julie agreed quickly. "It's just that we each have our own expertise. Anything having to do with long-term relationships is Grace's."

Camille pursed her lips, painted today in a rather shocking coral. "And how would you describe yourself?"

Julie's heel jittered beneath the desk in frustration. Camille knew full well what Julie's expertise was. Everyone at the *Stiletto* office did. Heck, half the women in Manhattan knew Julie by name. Knew what she stood for. *Stiletto* was *the* magazine to work at. The Dating, Love, and Sex department was *the* department to work in. And Julie, Grace Brighton, and Riley McKenna *were* Dating, Love, and Sex, respectively.

Julie answered slowly. "I'm all about butterflies, first kiss, getting him to call. You know, dating."

"Mm-hmm, and how is it that a woman goes from those giddy first few dates to the comfortable, committed stuff that Grace writes about?"

Julie's mind went blank. There was really no good way to tell the editor in chief of the country's largest women's magazine that you'd never bothered to think about what

happened *after*. And sure, maybe some people might think Julie a little insubstantial. But she was willing to bet those same people were perpetually dateless. Or entrenched in yoga pants and movie nights.

"Um, well ... I guess it sort of evolves?" Julie replied finally.

"How?"

"With the right person, it just happens. That's the mystery of what makes true love so special." *Gawd, I almost made myself vomit.*

Camille shook her head. "Not good enough. You've seen the letters from our readers. They want to know the specifics. These are women who've already had the third date. They've even been on the seventh. But then what? How do they move forward?"

Julie's sleeveless Kate Spade turtleneck dress suddenly felt a little tight around her throat.

"If not Grace, Riley could write it," Julie said, grasping at straws. "You know, I actually think she's been looking for a way to broaden her focus and take a break from the sex stuff for a while. Can't you just see it? 'Outside the Bedroom' or something like that."

"Julie," Camille said with a sigh, "Grace and Riley have their stories figured out for the next few issues. I've already okayed them."

"If you want a schedule of my future story ideas, I'd be happy to—"

"My mind's made up."

Okay, so Camille wasn't going to be persuaded with reason. Time to go for the editor's soft spot: *Stiletto* itself.

"I'm not sure this is what's best for the magazine," Julie said demurely. "I just don't have any experience with the ... you know ... long-term stuff."

But Camille wasn't biting. "So? You think every writer in this office has personal experience with everything they write about?"

I do, Julie thought. *Or at least I did.*

"Julie, look around. What does this look like to you?"

"Um, an office?" More accurately, a high-tech, state-of-the-art, killer corner office with a view of Central Park South.

"Exactly. It's an office of a magazine company. This is journalism, not your pink fuzzy diary," Camille snapped. "If you haven't been there yourself, talk to women who *are* going through that stage. Do what you always do—dive into our readers' heads and answer the hard stuff for them."

Julie bit back a sigh, knowing the battle was lost. Temporarily. Camille was one of those scary women who had made her way to the top of the food chain by having steel ovaries and a penchant for making people cry. Julie had always figured that if they'd made a movie about Camille's life she'd be played by either a stern Katharine Hepburn type or an intensely scary Robert De Niro on crack. She was about as soft as a hammerhead shark and half as friendly.

Still, Camille was right about one thing: this article could be done with a little bit of strategic networking. A major in journalism from the University of Southern California had taught Julie that media was more about *whom* you knew than *what* you knew. But

Julie had developed her own type of journalism over the years, one that involved a distinctly personal voice. And she hated the idea that she couldn't speak personally to a topic.

"So we're good?" Camille asked, standing to indicate that the conversation was over.
Not even close. "Definitely," Julie replied with a confident smile.

Camille had already picked up her cellphone and was yelling at her dry cleaner. Something about white stains on a black dress. *Awwwwwk-ward*.

Julie slipped out the door and was immediately surrounded by the sounds of *Stiletto* on a Friday afternoon. The mood in the Manhattan office was crackling even on a slow day, but by the end of the week the vibe was positively electric.

The office staff was made up almost entirely of women, with a handful of fashion-forward men. Everywhere she looked, there were skinny hips perched on a colleague's desk, gossip about evening plans, and lip gloss exchanges over cubicle walls as office makeup transitioned to happy-hour makeup.

Normally Julie would be making the rounds, figuring out if anyone had heard of something happening that she hadn't. It was more of a habit than anything else; Julie couldn't think of a time when she'd been the last to hear about a party. Being at the top of *Stiletto*'s ladder also meant you were at the top of New York's social ladder. The girls of the Dating, Love, and Sex department didn't have to fish for an invitation.

Julie made a detour into the kitchen, where Camille kept a few bottles of champagne stocked for celebrations and promotions.

Today Julie had another need for it—therapy.

If she had to write about taking things to the next level, she at least needed a drink first. And Riley and Grace were always game for a little in-office happy hour.

"Oh, Julie, I'm glad you stopped by."

Julie made a silent gagging motion at the fridge. *Kelli with a freaking i.* Julie should have hit the bottle sooner. Much sooner.

Julie had often marveled that fate had blessed her with a nemesis-free childhood. There was no schoolyard bully, no junior high rival, no high school drama. But all fate had really done was help her preserve her energy to deal with her adult nemesis: Kelli Kearns.

Although Julie and Kelli's sordid history belonged in the tabloids, for the most part they tried to keep it out of the office and ignore each other at all costs. But every now and then Kelli's size negative-two body seemed incapable of containing all of its venom, and some spewed out—usually in Julie's direction.

"What's up, Kelli?"

"First of all," Kelli said, holding up a skinny finger, "is that *company* wine? I was always under the impression that consumption had to be authorized by Camille."

Julie glanced down at the bottle in sham regret. "A valid point, Kelli. How about this: you go tell Camille *my* secrets, and I'll tell her *yours*. Sound good?"

Kelli's lips pressed together in disdain, and Julie resisted the urge to gloat. Kelli wouldn't breathe a peep about the champagne. Not that Camille would care, anyway. All she wanted from her employees was that they meet deadlines and keep their

columns sassy and snappy, all while fitting the stylish *Stiletto* mold. Camille didn't care if they needed a little wine to get there.

"Was there something else?" Julie asked. "Other than your concern over my liver and company funds?"

"Actually, yes," Kelli said, flicking her long blond ponytail over one bony shoulder. "I've been asked to clean out the fridge—"

"You know that you'd be a lot less on edge if you actually *ate* the food, right?"

"—and as I was cleaning I noticed this funny-looking sandwich. It has your name on it."

Julie glanced down at the plastic-wrapped sandwich in Kelli's hand. "Yup, mine from last week. I ate half and forgot about it."

Kelli shook her head in condescension. "It's wasteful, Julie. And I think I speak for the entire office when I say we're tired of you abusing your power."

"My power? What is it that I'm out to destroy with a half-eaten turkey sandwich? Thanksgiving?"

Kelli sighed. "I'm not trying to be difficult."

My ass, you're not.

"I'm just saying we all have to share a kitchen space, and it would be nice if even the senior columnists could clean up after themselves," Kelli said.

"Okay," Julie said, shoving the champagne bottle under her arm and snatching the sandwich from Kelli. She took a half step to the side and dropped it in the garbage. "We good? Is there a coffee mug I didn't position just right, or a pen I left somewhere?" *Maybe up your ass?*

Kelli snapped her fingers. "You know, I just thought of something else. I was wondering if maybe you could keep me updated on your notes for August's article."

Julie snorted. "And why would I do that?" *And why bother asking? We both know you just steal my notes when it suits you.*

Kelli's eyes went wide. "Camille didn't tell you?"

Julie stilled. "Tell me what?"

"Your assignment for August? The relationship story? Camille's worried you might not be up for it."

"And this is your business because ...?"

Kelli gave a sweet smile. "I'm your alternate. If your story doesn't cut it, Camille will print mine instead."

Oh, hell no.

With a violent twist of her hands, Julie uncorked the champagne and took a long swig as she marched out of the kitchen, her head reeling from Kelli's bomb.

There was only one thing worse than having to write this story.

And that was having Kelli-with-an-i write it for her.

Movie night, here I come.

*L*ove stories you'll never forget by authors you'll always remember.



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